# You Know I Ain't Queer …
# Queering Mediation and Sexuality in *Midnight Cowboy* and *Brokeback Mountain*

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"It's been more than 35 years when people would watch *Midnight Cowboy* and say 'What the hell was that all about?' Well, now we have fully accepted this new genre of cinema: gay westerns!"
- Jon Stewart, *The 78th Annual Academy Awards* (Horvitz, 2006:3).

# ABSTRACT


**ENGLISH**

*Gay western* – why does that sound like a paradox? This is a question that colours this thesis. It is easy enough: Homosexual men are feminine on film and the western is the ultimate masculine cinematic expression. These are established conventions and they colour our expectations.

I have studied how *Midnight Cowboy* (1969) and *Brokeback Mountain* (2005) mediate the sexuality of the protagonists, and how these representations relate to traditions of Hollywood film. This study of mediation of queer sexualities in American mainstream film is situated within a queer theoretical framework, providing a critical/inquisitive perspective to norms of mediation.

Gender and sexuality are mediated through characters, but they are also expressed through other cinematic aspects like setting, soundtrack or genre. In both of the movies western genre elements enhances and underlines the masculinity of the protagonists. Since masculine men in movies are expected to be heterosexual, the sex and the intimate relationships between men become a surprise—both within the diegesis (film universe) and in a film historical context. Sex between men rarely takes place at all in American mainstream movies. "Homosexuals" have instead been merely overtly feminine men who have had little to do wit sex.

These films break down the conception that "real" masculinity needs to be heterosexual, they show how anyone can be queer, and they underline the performative nature of gender, sexuality, and the whole concept of identity. Sexualities, genders and films are complex and do not always fit neatly into categories, and these films offer queer examples that are not so easy to categorise. Some of the advantages of the queer are the potential to make us think anew and contemplate the existing, socially constructed categories—of gender and sexuality, as well as categories and conventions of film.

**NORWEGIAN**

*Homowestern* – hvorfor høres dette ut som et paradoks? Dette er et spørsmål som farger denne masteroppgaven. Det er enkelt nok: Homofile menn er feminine på film og westernsjangeren er det definitive filmatiske uttrykket for maskulinitet. Dette er etablerte konvensjoner og de farger våre forventninger.

Jeg har studert hvordan *Midnight Cowboy* (1969) og *Brokeback Mountain* (2005) medierer protagonistenes seksualitet, og hvordan disse representasjonene forholder seg til tradisjoner innen Hollywood-filmen. Dette studiet av mediering av skeive/queere seksualiteter i amerikansk populærfilm tilbys i et queerteoretisk rammeverk, noe som tilfører den et kritisk og spørrende perspektiv til medieringsnormer.

Kjønn og seksualitet medieres gjennom karakterer, men det uttrykkes også gjennom andre filmatiske virkemidler slik som setting, soundtrack eller sjanger. I begge filmene understreker og forsterker westernelementene protagonistenes maskulinitet. Ettersom maskuline menn i filmer forventes å være heterofile, blir det intime og seksuelle forholdet mellom menn en overraskelse – både innenfor diegesen (filmuniverset) og i en filmhistorisk sammenheng. Sex mellom menn forekommer sjeldent i amerikansk populærfilm. ”Homofile” har rett og slett vært feminine menn som har hatt lite å gjøre med sex.

Disse filmene bryter med oppfattelsen av at ”ekte” maskulinitet nødvendigvis må være heterofil, de viser at hvem som helst kan være skeiv/queer, og de understreker det performative ved kjønn og seksualitet, og ved hele konseptet identitet. Seksualiteter, kjønn og filmer er komplekse og passer ikke alltid i kategorier, og disse filmene tilbyr skeive eksempler som nettopp er vanskelige å kategorisere. Noen av gevinstene ved det skeive er potensialet til å få oss til å tenke nytt og å fundere over de eksisterende, sosialt konstruerte kategoriene kjønn og seksualitet, og ikke minst kategoriene og konvensjonene knyttet til film.

# PREFACE & ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My very naïve and over ambitious initial intention with this thesis was to change the world. Somehow I managed at a point to realise how farfetched my goal was, and also to stop considering this thesis a *process* and actually visualising a *product*. And here it is. But I have not done this all by myself.

*Andrew Morrison* (supervisor autumn 2006 - spring 2009), thank you, thank you, thank you! For guiding me, supporting me, believing in my project from the very beginning (even in periods when I lost all faith in it myself), and for helping me adjust and focus my binoculars.

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Isabell B. Johansen,

Oslo, February 14th 2009.

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# CHAPTER 1
# INTRODUCTION

## 1.1 QUEER FILM GOES MAINSTREAM

Cinematic portrayals of non-hetero sexualities have not been allowed much space in mainstream Hollywood films, but, at the Oscar run of 2006 several of the movies nominated included non-hetero protagonists or protagonists who can be characterised as defying the established norms of gender depiction in classic Hollywood film. These films were "queer" in one way or another. *Transamerica* (2005) portrayed a transgendered woman, Brie. She was born a biological man, but she had a female gender identity, and decided to live as, and ultimately change her body to match this. *Capote* (2005) was based on the life of author Truman Capote, who was openly homosexual (Capote, 2004). *Brokeback Mountain* (Lee, 2005) portrayed two male sheep herders who meet one summer and engage in a sexual and emotional relationship spanning approximately twenty years.

The comment cited on page three of this thesis is one of Jon Stewart's jokes at *The 78th Annual Academy Awards* show. Stewart acted as host for this 2006 Oscar show, and his remark about "gay westerns" being a new genre of cinema received a round of applause and laughter. His joke is a reference to the "gay western" of the year, *Brokeback Mountain*, and he compares it to a previous Academy Award nominee and winner, *Midnight Cowboy* (Schlesinger, 1969). These two movies were the talk of their respective Oscar year, as both portray male protagonists who do not fit within the expectations to heterosexual normativity. In both these films we see the protagonist(s) engage in sexual behaviour with other men. The Oscar host makes a joke about these being *gay westerns,* as if *gay men* and the *western genre* are incompatible. He presents it as a humorous paradox even though homosexuality, being a *sexuality*, and the western, being a *movie genre*, are not linked in particular. This raises the question of why being gay should somehow be incompatible with the western genre. I found myself contemplating this, wondering why people, including me, laugh at such a remark.

## 1.2 PURPOSE AND MOTIVATION

In this thesis I look closely at *Midnight Cowboy* and *Brokeback Mountain,* and I study the movies in relation to the two aspects mentioned: *sexuality* and *genre*. My primary focus is the

portrayals of same-sex sexual relationships, and my main problem statement is: How is the sexuality of the protagonists mediated in *Midnight Cowboy* and *Brokeback Mountain*? I explore this question by also asking: How do the various elements of mediation have the potential to shape and change expectations? In answering this question I will in particular emphasise the use of genre. With my results from the analysis I will engage in a discussion where my main question is: How do these particular representations of male same-sex sexuality relate to classic cinematic traditions of Hollywood film? Through my analysis and my discussion I rely on established film theory, and a queer theoretical framework. I apply core concepts from gender/sexuality/queer studies as well as from film studies.

What I hope to achieve is to make a contribution to the study of portrayals of male same-sex sexuality in mainstream movies. Considerable work has been carried out in attempts to map the American mainstream movies' relationship to homosexuality, such as the classic *The Celluloid Closet: Homosexuality in the Movies* (Russo, [1981] 1987), where Vito Russo examines the Hollywood traditions of portraying lesbians and gay men by discussing these movies and the representations. The book is a significant contribution to studies on lesbian and gay representations in film as it brings into the light what has traditionally been rather invisible. Russo's book has been criticised on various grounds, though, among them for negligence in its account of lesbian representations, and the way it lists films and scenes with only a "half-baked" analytical or comparative approach (Fleming, 1983). Another book that has been crucial to giving me insight into the history of gay and lesbian representations is the more recent *Queer Images: A History of Gay and Lesbian Film in America* (Benshoff and Griffin, 2006). This book, by Harry M. Benshoff and Sean Griffin, continues the work of Russo, but expands the field and applies the concept of "queer" to gay and lesbian film history.

Another driving force for me in carrying out this thesis is my wish to introduce queer theory, queer film and a queer way of thinking. In this thesis I use the term *queer* in the tradition of *queer theory* and its desire to open established, categorical understandings of concepts like gender and sexuality. Queer theory is critical of the normative, and I seek to study cinematic representations on such a basis. Through this thesis I hope to offer some insight into queer theoretical traditions within studies of gender, sexuality, and film by means of providing a theoretical overview and by applying queer theory to film analysis. I believe that a more widespread "queer knowledge" within the movie industry could open for a broader horizon

and more complex and interesting cinematic expressions, and on a personal level queer has the potential to create attitudes that are more open-minded and inclusive of others. My personal motivations are also part of an analytical interest in unpacking some of the conventions and constructions of Hollywood film. With a queer perspective (on objects of study and on the world in general) the "rules" and "truths" that many take for granted are revealed as mere social constructions. My "queer" intention is to point out that categories like *homosexual* / *heterosexual, man / woman,* and all that they contain, are socially constructed categories, just like the categories of movie genres, like *western movies.* In addition, not everyone or everything fits neatly into these categories, and some may even fit in more than one category.

## 1.3 APPROACH

This thesis is a media study—more specifically a *film study*—but it is also situated within the field of *gender and sexuality studies* since what I look at in particular are representations of gender and sexuality, and because I apply a queer theoretical perspective to this study of film. The thesis takes the shape of a qualitative textual analysis where I look at both the content and the form of two movies. Formal aspects of the movies contribute to shaping our understanding of the content, and therefore I see them as inseparable. I concur with film theorist David Bordwell in that film cannot be viewed as a container with something in it that could just as well have been inside something else. One cannot speak of an "inside" or an "outside" of a film, as the formal aspects and the content functions as a whole that is perceived by the viewer (Bordwell and Thompson, [1979] 1997:67-68).

I want to point out that in performing a textual analysis, *theory* (terms and perspectives) and *procedure* are closely connected. The theory, through offering a perspective and the nomenclature, provides the analysis with a direction and becomes the instrument to understand the text and answer the problem statements (Østbye et al., [2002] 2006:62). In studying these movies and these characters in relation to sexuality and genre, and applying a *queer theoretical* framework, the theory becomes a crucial part of my method in this thesis. I rely on branches of film theory suited to equip me for performing the analysis, and I take on what I call a *queer perspective*, applying terminology from queer theory, and gender and sexuality studies. This makes the nature of this thesis interdisciplinary, but in studying the cinematic mediation of sexuality I need the framework that film, gender and sexuality studies provide, and to take a critical stand to the categories I need the queer theoretical framework. I

have drawn both on "classic" queer theory, as it developed from studies on gender and sexuality, and on queer *film* theory. Queer applied within film studies differs slightly from other branches of queer in that whereas other disciplines drawing on queer theory are usually associated with certain theorists and books, queer film studies emerged more through the discussions and studies of particular films or film makers (Stacey and Street, 2007:3-4).

I say that this is a *textual analysis*, and I want to address this before I move on. The study of film lends a lot of its nomenclature from literary and linguistic studies. Film is a relatively young medium compared to literature, theatre, or various forms of visual art. When film studies, film theory, and the practice of analysing films was first introduced, the film medium was often compared to that of written texts, and many of the theories and methods were derived from literary studies. The field of film studies, seeking its individuality, has tried other directions, and has combined traditions from several fields such as anthropology, psychology, and linguistics (Gabbard and Luhr, 2008:1). A linguistic approach offers a view on film as language with its own set of "grammar" and means of communicating a narrative. Such a view on film originates from the linguist Ferdinand de Saussure, and his ideas about *semiotics*[1]. "What is natural to mankind is not oral speech but the faculty of constructing language, i.e. a system of distinct signs corresponding to distinct ideas" (Saussure in Schatz, 1981:18). Within film studies there is a tradition of using the language analogy in studying movies, as commercial film very well can be seen as a communication system that structures and offers meaning (Schatz, 1981:18).

Since its dawn, film studies as an academic field has grown to take several directions with their respective sub-sections, and with structuralism and post-structuralism film studies can be said to have found a certain individuality. Gender became a favoured subject of study, and it still is. "Today, film scholars are much more likely to engage with feminist analysis, the problematization of masculinity, queer theory, and transgender issues than with questions of authorship or the aesthetics of the moving image" (Gabbard and Luhr, 2008:1). I situate my

[1] *Semiology* is the term that has traditionally been connected to Saussure's theories, while *semiotics* was connected to Charles S. Peirce's theories. The term *semiotics* has over time come to act as a unifying term for both of these traditions (Østbye et al., [2002] 2006:65), and as such this is the term I prefer to use in this case.

study within such interdisciplinary traditions, and I apply queer theory to a textual analysis focusing on character.

I analyse the two movies, *Midnight Cowboy* and *Brokeback Mountain,* looking at characters—mainly the protagonists—and how their sexuality is mediated. In studying these mediations of sexuality I look at both how the actual mediation is carried out through cinematic effects, and how the characters come across and how their sexuality appears. To be able to say something about their sexuality I need to look at how they are *gendered*, as sexuality is closely connected to gender. I study how the characters act as gendered individuals, and I study whether the movies can be considered to express gender.

To communicate a narrative and to establish characters film relies on means the medium has common with other media, and means unique to audio-visual media. For instance, film and television use cinematography and editing to control the viewer experience and to mediate its content (Phillips, 2000:63). In studying the characters I look at various techniques and aspects of the films and how they present the characters, and I will include both the means exclusively reserved to audio-visual media, and more general storytelling techniques.

I have watched the movies repeatedly, looked closely at certain scenes, and transcribed parts of the dialogue for closer study. Patrick Phillips' questions about how character is constructed and understood in the book *Understanding Film Texts* can be seen as a foundation for my analysis:

> * How is character constructed visually?
> * How is character constructed through dialogue?
> * How is character constructed through performance?
> * What is the significance of the position we are put in as spectators for responding to character?
> * To what extent is our response to the character out of the control of those who make the film?
> (Ibid.)

Phillips' questions contain questions addressing the text, and questions addressing the reception situation. I use the three first questions, directed at the text, as a starting point when studying the characters, but I also move beyond these questions and seek to find whether sexuality can be mediated through other means than these relating specifically to character. I also address the two last questions during the thesis.

I go into the concept of *expectations* during this thesis, seeing how it is closely related to categories. The human mind craves form, and in encountering artworks like films, and the world in general, the mind tries to see patterns and structures to make sense of the information

(Bordwell and Thompson, [1979] 1997:65), and it tries to sort phenomena into categories. I find *expectation* is an important concept in studying representations. How certain phenomena are understood and how the viewers see these representations have a lot to do with what expectations they have. This relates to Phillips' two last questions and brings in the viewer as an active part in creating and understanding the characters. The matter of the viewers' expectations is addressed in Chapter 2, where I give an overview of what *expectations* are in general, and I introduce some of the elements I consider to be the main participants in shaping expectations to gender and sexuality in movies, and to movies in general.

To be able to address my last part of the problem statement and to say something about how these particular movies relate to traditions of Hollywood film, I provide an outline of "homosexual film history" during Chapter 2. During this outline I have chosen to outline the trends and the tendencies without much reference to concrete film titles. I have chosen to leave out the specific titles because though they are significant, they are not really relevant for the thesis—the development is. If you are looking for the films of the different periods I suggest Russo's *The Celluloid Closet* (Russo, [1981] 1987) or Benshoff and Griffin's *Queer Images: A History of Gay and Lesbian Film in America* (Benshoff and Griffin, 2006) as these are the books I have largely relied on when constructing my overview of (gay/homosexual and queer) film history.

I want to problematise some of the terms I use throughout the thesis before I move on, like *homosexual,* or *man* and *woman* as terms of *identity*, or terms from film theory such as *western genre*. This thesis claims to have a queer theoretical perspective, and as the author I need to be aware of how I apply these terms, what implications come with the use of these particular terms, and what effect they might have on the reader. I could have consistently attempted to use more "neutral" terms like *same-sex sexual relationships,* as I have already used on one occasion, but I find it important to introduce and use these terms, if only to show how difficult they are, and how unclear the boundaries between them can be. During Chapter 2 I frequently use the terms "gay" or "homosexual", but in these cases I apply the terms used by the authors of the books I have based the theory on. By going through the terms, some of their etymology, and placing them within their historical context, I hope to shed some light on my understanding and use of the terms.

## 1.4 THESIS STRUCTURE

In Chapter 2 I give an introduction to the theory and the terms I have used. This chapter will provide an insight into the background and the concepts I see as necessary and relevant for approaching my main problem statement. Chapter 2 also elaborates on the objects of study and gives my reasons and choices for selecting my material. Chapter 3 is the analysis. I have given an introduction to how I approach the analysis, but I will go more in detail on how I have carried out my analysis during the introductory part of Chapter 3. I study scenes and various aspects of the movies to find how the protagonist's sexuality is mediated. I have found that it makes for a more interesting approach to study each of the two movies by themselves at first, going through them chronologically to better illustrate how expectations change and how the characters develop. In Chapter 4, which is the discussion, I will compare and contrast various sides of the films and the characters. By doing this I hope to reveal and emphasise traits that are easier to recognise once they are compared. I also seek to look at the movies in a broader picture and I discuss how they relate to traditions within classic Hollywood cinema. In Chapter 5 I sum up the thesis and provide my final conclusions.

# CHAPTER 2
# CONCEPTS, LITERATURE AND FILM TEXTS

## 2.1 INTRODUCTION

In this chapter I introduce the concepts needed to embark on the analysis. I give an account of some of the relevant literature within the fields, and I introduce the objects of study, the film texts. A key concept in this thesis is *queer*, but despite its position within this thesis there are several areas I need to introduce before I get to this main concept. In this chapter I begin by introducing film as a means of communication and explaining why I consider *expectation* a crucial term. Subsequently I work my way through various relevant aspects of film and its means of mediation. Ways of characterisation become especially important to my analysis as I study how characters are mediated. The particular aspect of the characters that I study is their *sexuality*, and therefore I give an account of how sexuality can be understood, and I provide an introduction to traditions of representing same-sex sexuality in American mainstream film. These are all parts that I consider important to address before I finally go into the concept *queer* and its connection to the preceding material. My last stop in this chapter will be to give an insight into my choice of objects of study, the particular films in question.

## 2.2 DO YOU SPEAK FILM?

To be able to communicate as accurately as possible, we need language. This language needs to be structured and it needs symbols that have been assigned a certain meaning. This is the substance of basic linguistics. As the analogies of film as language or text have been common within film studies, some of the nomenclature within film study is derived from linguistics, and from other humanities and sciences such as literature studies. Whether film is actually a language or not is not a discussion I will take here. It is not relevant for this thesis. What I *will* lean on is that film communicates meaning, whether language or not. The branch of study within linguistics dedicated to meaning in communication is called *semantics*, and it is possible to talk about semantics of film.

On the subject of meaning-making in texts the theorists take different positions: Is meaning created by the author/film maker and then communicated through the text, or is meaning created by the reader/viewer in meeting with the work? Post-structuralism emerged during the

1960s as a counter-movement to structuralism, and considered the meaning-making process that occurs when the reader encounters a text as far more important than the author's intentions. A consequence of this post-structural perspective of meaning being created in the reader's/viewer's encounter with the work is that a text will change with each reading. This follows the groundbreaking work of Roland Barthes, and the development of semiotic analysis (Østbye et al., [2002] 2006:64-66). With each different reader the text will change meaning somewhat, and the meaning will change as time goes by and society and people change. "Meaning is not something inert, a passive attribute of books, films, computer programs, or other objects. Rather it is the result of a process whereby people 'make sense' of something with which they are confronted" (Gledhill and Williams, 2000:10). This quote is indicative of a post-structural understanding of how meaning in texts is made. The author adds: "The often-asked question 'Is the spectator active or passive?' is a stupid one. Of course the spectator is active" (Ibid.), and calls this "common sense" (Ibid., 11). This is a somewhat blatant statement and it ignores other viewpoints, but I tend to agree that the meaning of a work will change with the reader. In addition there is an intention behind the work, from the film makers or the author. However, once the work is released, it is out of the control of the creating force behind it. As such I have already taken a stand in the questions Patrick Phillips posed to the viewer's partaking in constructing characters.

To make up a language, or a meaning-laden system of communication, various ways of categorising lend themselves to structuring and systematising content. We relate phenomena to each other—both natural and man-made—and group those with similarities. Within film, *genres* have been widely applied as a structured system, being a way to sort films with similar traits in categories. These similar traits that movies within a genre have in common are usually called *conventions* (Bordwell and Thompson, [1979] 1997:71).

Such established categories contain a certain incorporated meaning well known to those who have been exposed to it and are used to that particular system of categorisation. This does not contradict the concept of meaning being made when the viewer/reader encounters the text, though. The meanings of such categorical systems are not inherent in the individual texts, but are rather inscribed within the established categories which are then utilised by the film maker. "Each genre incorporates a sort of narrative shorthand whereby significant dramatic conflicts can intensify and then be resolved through established patterns of action and by familiar characters types" (Schatz, 1981:24). To be able to decode and understand the

"narrative shorthand", to make meaning of the work, the viewers need certain knowledge of the system, and, indeed, they need to participate actively and respond interpretatively

## 2.3 EXPECTATION

When the viewer is familiar with the categorical structures, this familiarity creates *expectations*. Viewers' expectations are therefore also central to the processes of making meaning. When encountering a certain category—whether in film or in real life—familiarity with the category shapes our expectations, and in turn the expectation prepares us for how to react. There is of course a difference in how we perceive, and in turn how we need to react to, movies and reality. Real life requires that we perceive things in a practical way while films do not. What happens on the screen does not hold the same practical importance to us as real life does (Bordwell and Thompson, [1979] 1997:68).

When writing about conventions and experience with film form, David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson state: "Our ability to spot cues, to see them as forming systems, and to create expectations is guided by our real-life experiences and our knowledge of formal conventions" (Ibid., 71). This means that to understand a film, to recognise patterns and recurring events and phenomena, we draw on both real-life experiences *and* our encounters with other films and artworks—*intertextuality*.

*Schema*, or cognitive structure, is a central term in philosopher Jean Piaget's writings. According to his use of the term, schemata contain an individual's knowledge and experience, and provide grounds for interpreting, understanding or reacting correctly to phenomena (Bø and Helle, [2002] 2007:228). We process new information and compare it to how it fits into the schemata we have. The schemata help us interpret and predict situations. If what we approach does not fit entirely in an established category we might adjust our schema to include the new phenomenon. This process of adjusting to the world as we encounter new experiences and receive new information is called *accommodation* and is another term favoured by Piaget (Ibid., 11). An example would be the way we have created a door schema through our experiences with various doors. This prepares us for how to open an unfamiliar door. If a new door is very different from previous doors we have seen we might accommodate this new experience into our schema.

We also use schemata to understand movies. *The Classical Hollywood Cinema* (Bordwell et al., [1985] 2004) addresses expectations to Hollywood movies and refers to E.H. Gombrich when it introduces expectations, schemata and mental sets. One schema when encountering Hollywood films is the shot/reverse shot pattern: "Because of the tradition behind the schema, the viewer in turn expects to see the shot/reverse shot figure, especially if the first shot of the combination appears" (Ibid., 8). We become familiar with recurring structures, and in turn we expect similar occurrences to follow similar patterns. The established schemata and expectations constitute the viewer's mental set. "A style, like a culture or climate of opinion, sets up a horizon of expectation, a mental set, which registers deviations and modifications with exaggerated sensitivity" (Gombrich in Bordwell et al., [1985] 2004:8).

Schemata, expectations and mental sets are not always based on own experience, or even rooted in reality, however. What we have been told, or assumptions we make without experiencing first-hand, also shape our expectations. Such information can be incorrect, insufficient, or even false, and in such an instance we risk basing our expectations on false premises. One kind of source that provides dense information, but is in danger of portraying an incorrect or inaccurate picture of reality, is the *stereotype*. A stereotypical image can be considered a type of schema, and it provides a set of expectations.

## 2.4 WHAT EXPECTATIONS, AND WHERE DO THEY COME FROM?

Having introduced how we shape expectations according to categorical structures, and how the expectations affect our way of thinking and our perception, I want to go into the specific categorical structures I deal with in this thesis: Film, and sexuality and gender (in film). As touched upon earlier, conventions are made up by certain traits that objects within a category have in common. "Bodies of conventions constitute *norms* of what is appropriate or expected in a particular tradition" (Bordwell and Thompson, [1979] 1997:71). Even though these observations are from film theory and refer to genre, they can be applied to other categories, non-cinematic, as well. To lay the groundwork for this thesis, I now go through some of the "norms" connected to film, gender and sexuality.

### 2.4.1 THE CLASSICAL HOLLYWOOD STYLE

In this thesis I focus on two movies, both American, both Academy Award winners, and both broadly distributed, making them easily available. Though they each have their own

characteristics setting them apart, they are still highly influenced by the "classical Hollywood style". As Hollywood is the most prominent influence on Western film making today, I concentrate on Hollywood film heritage in this thesis. There are several other film traditions beyond Hollywood, like the American independent scene, the porn industry, non-American traditions like the colourful Indian Bollywood cinema, or various European waves and movements, just to mention a few. Within these very different traditions there is material concerning "queer themes" with various degrees of explicitness, and in cases this material is much more explicit than Hollywood is ready to display. As Vito Russo writes, "Hollywood has always been more restrained onscreen than real life dictated at any given time" (Russo, [1981] 1987:46). But in this thesis I have chosen to write about the mainstream American, and therefore I will introduce this particular style of film making.

Even though the Hollywood cinema includes a large body of different films over many years, and many film makers are associated with this tradition, Bordwell argues well in favour of speaking of the Hollywood repertoire as a body of movies with several similar characteristics. "We all have a notion of the typical Hollywood film. The very label carries a set of expectations, often apparently obvious, about cinematic form and style" (Bordwell et al., [1985] 2004:3). During the years of film making the films originating from Hollywood have grown in a distinct direction. Their expression through film form and technique is what Bordwell chooses to label "classical" (Ibid.). Among such formal and technical traits of the "classical Hollywood film" are for instance the importance of the narrative, the attempt to be "realistic", the importance of concealing "its artifice through techniques of continuity and 'invisible' storytelling; that the film should be comprehensible and unambiguous; and that it possesses a fundamental emotional appeal that transcends class and nation" (Ibid.). In Bordwell's book *The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style & Mode of production to 1960*, the particular chapter that introduces the traditions of the Hollywood cinema is even called "An excessively obvious cinema" (Bordwell et al., [1985] 2004).

#### 2.4.1.1 GENRE

Hollywood is commercial film making, and they want to make films the viewers want to see. Therefore the producers need to be aware of what actually sells so they can systematically reproduce more of the same (Schatz, 1981:4). Movies are expensive, and those who invest in a movie production want to be as certain as possible that the product will actually earn money. "[O]n the one hand, their product must be sufficiently inventive to attract attention and satisfy

the audience's demand for novelty, and on the other hand, they must protect their investment by relying to some extent upon established conventions that have been proven through previous exposure and repetition" (Ibid., 5). The genre approach to movies considers film making a commercial art, it takes into account that the audience influence film production over time by how they respond to individual films, and it treats cinema as a primarily narrative medium (Ibid., vii-viii).

A genre is a body of films that have certain traits in common—films that share certain conventions—but it is easier to recognise a genre film than it is to define a genre (Bordwell and Thompson, [1979] 1997:51). Bordwell and Thompson still attempt a definition:

> Most scholars now agree that no genre can be defined in a single hard and fast way. Some genres stand out by their subjects or themes. […]
> Yet subject matter or theme is not so central to defining other genres. Musicals are recognizable chiefly by their manner of presentation: singing, dancing, or both. […] And some genres are defined by the distinctive emotional effect they aim for […]. Apparently no strictly logical distinctions can capture the variety of factors which create the genres we have.
> Within any one genre, things are also fairly loose. A genre is best thought of as a rough category intuitively shared by audience and filmmaker.
> (Ibid., 52)

Within the genres there are also subgenres, inhabited by movies sharing an even more narrow set of conventions. Furthermore movies can very well belong to more than one category. Genre mixing can make for interesting products (Ibid.).

"As a visual medium, cinema can also define genres through conventional *iconography*. A genre's iconography consists of recurring symbolic images that carry meaning from film to film" (Ibid., 53). Iconography can take the shape of objects or settings, and such icons are laden with meaning beyond its mere physical appearance. By relying on the conventions and iconography of a genre, the film makers are able to express a lot without the need to show or say it explicitly. This way genre movies can communicate quickly and economically. On the viewer's part, by being familiar with the conventions they have "a pathway into the film", as Bordwell and Thompson write (Ibid.). When incorporating such icons and conventions the film makers do not only provide the viewer with information about the film and its narrative, but it also gives the viewer grounds for creating expectations. Different genres create different expectations, and one element has the potential to signify different things in different genres, such as the creaking of a door, which in one setting creates general anticipation, while in a horror movie a creaking door will create expectations of something scary (Ibid., 318).

To keep its viewers the genres must continually reinvent their formula, but at the same time they must keep the genre recognisable and maintain the elements that made it popular. When the audience is not challenged by the genre anymore, they will demand: ”Show us something more complicated” (Braudy in Schatz, 1981:38). Art historian Henri Focillon studied the development of cultural forms, their life span. Thomas Schatz looks to Focillon’s work, and draws upon Film theorist Christian Metz’ studies on the evolution of the western genre, when he gives his account of the evolution of film genres: The *experimental* stage is the time in which the genre and its conventions are established. Then there is the *classic* stage, during which the conventions have been established and are understood by both film makers and audience. The *refined* stage is when “certain formal and stylistic detail embellish the form” (Schatz, 1981:37-38), and at last there is the *baroque* stage, or self-reflexive stage, “when the form and its embellishments are accented to the point where they themselves become the “substance” or “content” of the work” (Ibid., 38). During this last stage the genre has grown more self-conscious, and can relate ironically to itself.

#### 2.4.1.2 THE WESTERN

A classic example of a Hollywood film genre is the western. It is one of the oldest genres of mainstream American film, and it has gone through all the above stages of genre evolution. Some of the very first American feature films, like *The Great Train Robbery* of 1903, are considered western films, and the western genre has developed alongside the American film industry. The ideas of the western, the themes, the concept of moving westwards and taming the uncivilised, predate the film medium and was popular narratives and mythologies, and as soon as this new medium was available, these themes were adapted to film (Ibid., 45-46). These stories, and in extension the genre, continued to be extraordinarily popular among the public, and as such it was popular in Hollywood. Western stories even dominated prime-time television throughout the late 1950s (Gabbard and Luhr, 2008:6).

Having been around almost as long as the film medium itself, the western genre can be said to have completed its evolutionary “cycle“, at least according to Thomas Schatz. After its initial experimental stage, the western genre entered its classical period in the late 1930s. At this point *Stagecoach* (1939) and other films like it was released. By the 1950s the genre had entered what can be considered its refined period, in which we saw titles like *High Noon* (1952). At this point the western had begun questioning its own conventions, and reflected on its social role and the psychology of the western hero. As the genre reached its baroque stage

it did further reflection on its hero, and in the films of this period he could be portrayed as an antiheroic, psychotic and antisocial character (Schatz, 1981:40).

The setting and the iconography of the western have become some of its more prominent and recognisable characteristics, such as the cowboy hat in particular. Throughout the genre's development, the iconography has assumed clearer significance. In developing and reflecting on its own expression, the codes can be manipulated to achieve a greater or even a rather different or surprising effect (Ibid., 22).

According to Gabbard and Luhr the western, like most genres, has established its own relationship to gender expression and its own sense of what manliness and womanliness is. Such presumptions about gender differ with the different genres, and in a western the central male character is traditionally of a violent kind of masculinity (Gabbard and Luhr, 2008:2). Robert Lang seems to concur with this to a certain degree. He explains that the viewers encounter the western with expectations to gender representation within the genre. We expect the western "to deliver mainstream images of masculine norms. More than most, it seems to deal in conservative, iconographically ritualized representations of masculinity, and seeks to articulate in the western hero a specifically American style of manliness" (Lang, 2002:5). In the case of violence, Lang argues that "[…] it is not violence at all which is the 'point' of the western movie, but a certain image of man, a style, which expresses itself most clearly in violence" (Robert Warshow in Lang, 2002:5). Thomas Schatz describes some of the common traits of the classic western hero and his characteristic function: "he is an isolated, psychologically static man of personal integrity who acts because society is too weak to do so" (Schatz, 1981:57). This is a classic image of the "westerner", but as the genre becomes more reflected, he also develops and in time, with the "psychological western", he becomes more cynical and self-conscious (Ibid., 59). But though the western hero develops with the genre and becomes a more complex character, he is, more or less as a rule, a man, whether the focus of the story is male friendship and bonding, or male isolation and loneliness, the common feature seems to be the maleness and the masculinity.

#### 2.4.1.3 REPRESENTATION, CHARACTER

Representations are mediated re-presentations of groups of people who share certain traits. Characterisation and representation are shaped by the medium through which the character is "given life", and by how the medium is used. Since reality is much more complex than any

system of representation can communicate, representation is the product of different codes and conventions available through the medium used. In addition to the medium providing possibilities and constraints, the genres within the medium also add possibilities and limitations. Our understanding of how the movie uses genre influence our understanding of the characters (Dyer, [1993] 2002:2-3).”Every genre has its character types and, in some genres, these characters are easily ‘indexed’ by costume and mannerism” (Phillips, 2000:66).

Richard Dyer explains how we look for other people we have something in common with, like sexual orientation, and through this connection social groupings emerge. Categories like lesbian or gay are not “natural” or “true” categories, but are social groups with something in common. Dyer ascribes a lot of power to the media when he suggests that it works as a catalyst for social groupings, and that media representations actually create the very social groupings that they re-present (Dyer, [1993] 2002:3).

#### 2.4.1.4 STEREOTYPES

Walter Lippman elaborates on the term stereotype in his book on media and democracy, *Public Opinion,* which was first released in 1922. He says this about stereotypes:

> They are an ordered, more or less consistent picture of the world, to which our habits, our tastes, our capacities, our comforts and our hopes have adjusted themselves. They may not be a complete picture of the world, but they are a picture of a possible world to which we are adapted. In that world people and things have their well-known places, and do certain expected things. We feel at home there. We fit in. We are members. We know the way around. There we find the charm of the familiar, the normal, the dependable […] (Lippman, [1922] 2003)[2].

Lippman writes that in meeting with something unknown, in a case where we have no previous experience, we will have trouble comprehending. To compensate for our limitations, we group what we do not know into blocks of similar phenomena. For an outsider, only gross differences are perceived when standing before a group of similar objects, but for one who is familiar with the objects it is easier to spot differences and nuances (Ibid.)[3]. This resembles what Gombrich talks about, and links the stereotype to expectations, mental sets and schemata.

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[2] Excerpt from chapter seven, “Stereotypes as Defense”. URL to chapter seven: http://xroads.virginia.edu/~Hyper2/CDFinal/Lippman/ch07.html (Accessed: 24.04.2008).

[3] Excerpt from chapter six, “Stereotypes”. URL to chapter six: http://xroads.virginia.edu/~Hyper2/CDFinal/Lippman/ch06.html (Accessed: 24.04.2008).

Richard Dyer elaborates on the concept of the stereotype within film, where he draws upon Lippman's definitions. Dyer states: "The role of the stereotype is to make visible the invisible, so that there is no danger of it creeping up on us unawares; and to make fast, firm and separate what is in reality fluid and much more closer to the norm than the dominant value system cares to admit" (Dyer, [1993] 2002:16). Today many associate *stereotype* with a negative image, a "negative shorthand" (Helsby, 2005:8), but by themselves stereotypes are not negative. Dyer points out that though it is usually considered an abusive term "it is not stereotypes, as an aspect of human thought and representation, that are wrong, but who controls and defines them, what interest they serve" (Dyer, [1993] 2002:12). Based on Lippman's definitions, Dyer identifies different uses and aspects of stereotyping and claims that they can be seen as: An ordering process, a short cut, references, and the expression of values.

As *an ordering process* we use stereotypes as generalities, patternings and typifications, but the stereotype represents merely partial knowledge. Still, "partial knowledge is not false knowledge, it is simply not absolute knowledge" (Ibid.). As *short cuts* stereotypes are easy to recognise and understand, and though they might appear as "simple" representations, they contain complex information and connotations, and therefore imply knowledge of a social structure (Ibid., 12-13). They let the audience know a lot about a person in a short amount of time, and to some degree all films use stereotypes. Films usually tell a story in less than two hours, and "visual shorthand" and instant characterisation is therefore crucial (Benshoff and Griffin, 2006:15). As *reference* stereotypes point to generalities. Dyer views stereotypes as a subcategory of the fictional *type*, which is the opposite of a *novelistic character*—one that develops through the narrative (Dyer, [1993] 2002:13). Stereotypes are also an *expression of values*. From the collective agreement and recognition of stereotypes one could get the impression that this agreement existed prior to, and independently of, the stereotype and thus was the source of the stereotype. On the contrary, Dyer claims, most people base their assumptions of such social groups *on* the stereotypes (Ibid., 14). I guess Dyer agrees with Oscar Wilde's famous aphorism: "Life imitates art far more than art imitates Life".

### 2.4.2 GENDER AND SEXUALITY …AND FILM

Gender and sexuality studies have grown within the field of identity studies. They have also influenced film studies, but the study of the relationship between gender and film did not emerge until the 1970s. Gender and sexuality are some of the categories that are often

represented through the use of stereotypes, and most people are familiar with and know the coding. We grow up seeing gendered expressions and representations of sexuality around us—both in real life and through various mediations. From early on we are taught to divide between *his* things and activities, and *hers*. I agree with Gabbard and Luhr in that our understanding of masculinity and femininity, and how they are constructed in present day society, is near to impossible without referencing film, and in particular Hollywood (Gabbard and Luhr, 2008:1). Psychologist and sexologist John Money also addresses the way culture shapes our understanding of gender:

> In the years of childhood, the gender-coded development of boys and girls invariably mirrors the masculine and feminine stereotypes of their social heritage. In the human species, there is no way in which to ascertain what culture-free masculinity and femininity would be like, for they are always packaged in culture, just as linguistic ability is always packaged in a native language (Money, 1988:54).

And, I will add, today this is also the case with sexuality.

Most people—at least in the Western part of the world—grow up watching movies, and have a lifelong relationship with this medium. Film lets us watch how other people live their private lives, and thus film is one of our most important sources when it comes to shaping our understanding of gender and sexuality. "[T]he movies have taught us what it means to be heroic or villainous, masculine or feminine, heterosexual or homosexual. The movies […] influence how we think about ourselves and the world around us" (Benshoff and Griffin, 2006:2). We know the rules and definitions from early on, even if they are not necessarily told explicitly, and through watching films and the world around us we learn how to be a woman and how to be a man. We also learn about how the sexualities are represented and learn how to be homosexual and how to be heterosexual.

As a category, gender is usually considered a binary, containing the two parts *feminine* and *masculine*. The human brain needs structure, and it needs to sort information in systems in order to make sense of it, retrieve it, and communicate it. The two sides of a binary are defined as contrasts or opposites to each other. The two categories will then complete each other, and one will be defined as *not being* the other. Sexuality is also usually seen as a binary in the Western society of today: Heterosexual & homosexual. Such binary thinking influences several aspects of society and culture, and impacts areas as language, legislation, division of powers, and medicine. Tiina Rosenberg, professor of gender studies, states that though categories such as man and woman, or heterosexual and homosexual, are binaries and supposed to compliment and complete each other, they are not considered equal. They are

rather hierarchically constructed with respectively the man and the heterosexual as the superior (Rosenberg, 2002:17). As an extension of this, the "normality" of heterosexuality has been labelled *heteronormativity,* or the *heterosexual normative*. Heteronormativity is the sustaining of heterosexuality as the "normal" and "natural", and the expectation that relationships should consist of one *masculine* part and one *feminine* part where each has its "natural" role (Ibid., 12-13). Heterosexuality is taken for granted and expected, and it is common to presume that a person is heterosexual, unless proved otherwise. This is the consequence of heteronormative thinking, and a widespread attitude in our society today.

#### 2.4.2.1 GENDER / SEX

Hollywood's traditions of portraying the masculine and the feminine implicates a binary "either/or" view. In mainstream movies both are usually present to give the viewer the possibility to compare the two and see the one as contrasting or opposite to the other. Often a man and a woman in a traditional Hollywood movie display contrasting traits, complementing or completing each other. Another such simple, frequently used binary is good and evil*;* both need to be present and they are easy to distinguish from each other. A term borrowed from literature is the *foil.* This is a character placed within the narrative to contrast or compliment the protagonist. Through the foil certain aspects of the protagonist will become clearer—aspects that might not have been so easy to notice had this contrasting opposite not been there ("Foil", *Encyclopædia Britannica Online*, 2008). If the hero of a classic, narrative movie is meant to be masculine, there is often a feminine foil to enhance his masculinity.

Movies, or other texts, are not gendered. Film makers use their own frame of reference in creating movies and put certain elements that they consider gendered into the product. These will be coloured by their experiences and culture. Then the viewers in turn gender the movies when they see them according to their experiences. Also, what is masculine and what is feminine is constantly re-written, and there are always someone who challenge these codes, creating new expressions that might even be a future ideal (Bell-Metereau, 1993:xx). Annie Lennox, Madonna, David Bowie and Marilyn Manson are just some figures in popular culture who have defied the norms of gender expressions and become role models. "[G]ender is constantly changed and remade in and through the process of performance and representation" (Benshoff and Griffin, 2004:218-219).

*Gender* has been tried defined and fixed by several fields of research, such as biology, sociology and psychology, and a common feature of such attempts is the dichotomist classification man/woman, male/female, or masculine/feminine. The categories are usually understood as mutually excluding, they are easily recognisable, and they are expected to desire each other and make couples (Eng in Lorentzen and Mühleisen, 2006:136) . Such definitions have often been rooted in biological differences, and most societies and cultures have such a division with various implications. John Money problematises the terms connected to people's sex, as they are insufficient when the cases they refer to are not strictly one or the other. In the early 1950s he recognised that the existing nouns were not adequate. Money therefore borrowed the term gender from linguistics in one of his works from 1955, and introduced the concepts of *gender role* and *gender identity* (Money, 1988:52-53).

To clarify some of the terms that John Money made a distinction between:

- *Gender* is an inclusive umbrella term gathering "all the different components of sex difference, including the sex-genital, sex-erotic, and sex-procreative components" (Ibid., 52).
- *Sex* (biological) classifies individuals as male or female.
- *Gender role* (social part) is the role one takes on and acts out in relation to other people.
- *Gender identity* (private) is the personal understanding of own gender. Gender role and gender identity are two sides of the same coin. Other people infer your gender identity from the gender role that is acted out (Ibid., 53).

Money's use of the term gender reaches back to the 1950s, and relatively speaking, this is fairly recently. The dawn of a critical gender consciousness in society emerged in the late 1960s and early 1970s with women's liberation movements. Such movements of the mid 1960s were concerned with women's roles—at home and in the workplace—and women in male dominated communities initiated fights for women's rights and started pressuring these communities to address the issue of discrimination against women. Activist women groups and their protests and demonstrations on behalf of women's rights gradually increased public awareness about feminist issues. Simultaneously the neglected female perspective was picked up in academia

Women scholars brought this perspective to film studies, and studied both women on film and women behind the camera. Branches of for instance feminist or psychoanalytical film studies emerged and theorists such as Laura Mulvey and E. Ann Kaplan are some of the prominent

contributors to applying gender studies to film studies. Mulvey's essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" [4] was an influential piece of work with rather radical ideas on women in film and the various male *gazes* she is exposed to (Kaplan in Gabbard and Luhr, 2008:16-18; Mulvey, 1999).

In the 1980s and 1990s there was an advancement of women's studies (and gay and lesbian studies) that problematised what had been deemed "normal" or "natural" in the sense of gender identity (Bell-Metereau, 1993:ix). Since then the field of gender studies has broadened, and since the 1990s alternative perspectives developed such as studies on masculinity, queer theory, and queer cinema studies (Gabbard and Luhr, 2008:1-2). These directions were inspired by feminist theory and posed new questions and challenges to the concepts of feminist theory (and feminist film theory). Having focused on women within gender studies for so long, theorists like Steve Neale meant that the masculine was being neglected. With various wars behind us, the conventional notions of American masculinity were being brought into the light and the border between heroism and brutality were studied, among other things (Kaplan in Gabbard and Luhr, 2008:16, 23-24).

Film has the opportunity to take use of the audio-visual coding of gender in establishing characters. Costumes and other forms of mise-en-scene become important signifiers, and the voice also becomes part of coding characters as gendered. "Vestimentary codes, clothing as a system of signification, speak in a number of registers: class, gender, sexuality, erotic style" (Bell-Metereau, 1993:x). But fashion changes, and codes of dressing change their meaning as time passes[5]. John Money also writes about gender coding: "Gender coding is by definition dualistic. One-half of the code is for female, the other for male. A child must assimilate both halves of the code, identifying with one and complementing the other" (Money, 1988:72). Here he underlines the binary thinking of gender, and shows how we need to be familiar with both masculine and feminine coding—to *apply* the one set and *avoid* the other.

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[4] Originally Published: Screen 16.3 Autumn 1975 pp. 6-18.

[5] For instance, blue was not always the colour of boys and pink that of girls. Early in the twentieth century (before World War I) it was the other way around. Pink was considered a strong and decided colour, fit for boys, while blue was viewed as more delicate. What has changed is people's perception of colours and their connotation, not their perception of gender (Garber, 1992:1-2).

#### 2.4.2.2 SEXUALITY

In our modern society sexuality is a complex term, but I will make an attempt to clarify my understanding of the concept. People have always had *sex* but *sexuality,* the *systematisation of sex*, is a quite modern thought that started gaining its present meaning as late as in the nineteenth century (Nissen, [2001] 2003). The major difference is that while *sex* is actions, something we *do*, *sexuality* is something we are considered to *be*, an *identity*.

Nils Axel Nissen, literary theorist and scholar in gender studies, attempts to define the modern understanding of sexuality by stating that it still has to do with behaviour/experience (who you have sex with and how), but other dimensions are also taken into account, such as attraction/desire (who you feel attracted to; who you fantasise about), love (who you fall in love with; who you enter a romantic relationship with), and ultimately identity (how you perceive yourself) (Foucault, [1976] 1995; Nissen, [2001] 2003:29). This division shows how complex this modern understanding of the concept of sexuality is. By grouping love and desire into *feelings* it simplifies the matrix somewhat, and allows for the understanding of sexuality as being constituted by the aspect of self identification, the practice of sex, and emotional reactions (Pedersen and Kristiansen, 2008:70-73).

Film has always been a medium of the voyeurs, and in showing sex and intimacy we do not even have to have first-hand experience to claim to have "experience". We learn from watching films where we get to see how others "do it". Since the 1960s sexuality has become even more of a social matter, and already before a person debuts sexually, that person will have certain preferences and expectations based on sex in media. Even though most people probably think of sex as actions performed privately, sexuality has undeniably received a social significance; sexuality has become a public matter and it shapes us as social beings. This is a sociological aspect of sexuality, and film plays its role in making it a social matter.

#### 2.4.2.3 HOMOSEXUALITY

As long as people have had sex, sexual acts and attraction between people of the same sex have also existed. This is not exclusive to humans; it is also the case among many animals. But with the modern understanding of sexuality as identity and not only a practise, the term *homosexuality* was coined. The term appeared in the 1860s and was, and is, a term to describe people who are drawn toward people of the same gender as themselves. Nissen explains that

people with a sexual interest in someone of their own sex have never before been such clearly defined as a group or minority as they have been these last hundred or so years (Nissen, [2001] 2003:19-23). The first known use of the word is from 1869 when K.M. Benkert used it in an argument opposing laws against sodomy in Germany (King and Bartlett, 1999). Homo*sexual* was the term that came into use, focusing on the *sexual practise* of a person, but John Money argues that the term's focus on sexual practise, on the genital sexuality, could have been avoided if Benkert had rather focused on other dimensions of sexuality. Money suggests alternative terms like homo*philic,* where the criterion would be falling in love; or homo*genic*, with the criterion of attraction toward those of the same sex (Money, 1988:9).

The meaning of the term homosexual has changed since it was first introduced. In the word's early sense, as used into the beginning of the twentieth century, it was strongly associated with gender identity. Homosexual men were considered to be female souls trapped in male bodies, and the other way around in the case of women. The term did express sexual attraction between people of the same sex, as today, but it did not distinguish between sexual object choice and gender identity. The modern terms for people whose gender identity does not match their biological sex are *transgendered* or *transsexuals* (Benshoff and Griffin, 2004:3), and this must be distinguished from terms of sexuality. In its early use the term described a medical condition—ego-syntonic homosexuality—where a person is content with his/her homosexuality. It was classified as a psychological disorder with the American Psychiatric Association until 1973 ("Homosexuality", *Encyclopædia Britannica Online,* 2008), and was not removed as a diagnosis by the International Classification of Diseases until 1992 (King and Bartlett, 1999). In addition, homosexuality has also been considered a criminal offence by the law in many places, and still is in several countries[6], and according to many religions it is even a sin (Benshoff and Griffin, 2004:3).

Discourses on homosexuality have arisen within fields like literature, medicine, psychiatry, religion and law. Such discourses have given power to the social controls, but at the same time they made it possible to initiate a counter discourse. Homosexuality started speaking on

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[6] Countries like Somalia, Sudan, Bangladesh and Saudi-Arabia practice death penalty for homosexuality. On the other hand, Norway, South Africa, Spain, the Netherlands, Canada, Belgium, and selected states in the USA acknowledge same-sex marriages to be equal to opposite-sex marriages (Marriage Equality in Our World, *Equal Marriage for same-sex couples*).

its own behalf and claimed its legitimacy. The terms of abuse were turned around and used by the very people they "labelled" (Foucault, [1976] 1995:113). Language holds power, and there is power in the process of labelling, but there is also a power in adopting existing, suppressive labels and making them something positive.

A particular incident that has been ascribed great importance in terms of building self-worth and claiming respect are the Stonewall riots. They took place in New York in June 1969 and could be said to have been a catalyst for the gay rights movements. Police raids of gay bars were frequent at the time, and during a raid at the bar the Stonewall Inn, the customers decided to fight back[7]. The Stonewall incident has been described as having sparked new attitudes of pride, and as kick-starting a struggle towards acceptance and equality. This was possible because of the amount of mainstream media attention that the riots received. With such visibility people became aware of these issues, and it was possible to join forces (Benshoff and Griffin, 2006:130). But even though Stonewall has been named a crucial moment in gay and lesbian history, Thomas Piontek argues that this shift, the "before" and "after" Stonewall, is easier to see looking at this retrospectively than it was to identify the riots as a milestone moment as it happened. There were "homophile" movements[8] fighting for acceptance also in the 1950s and 1960s (Piontek, 2006:9-13, 16). Also, seen in a wider picture, the Stonewall incident was part of the larger "sexual revolution" throughout the 1960s (Benshoff and Griffin, 2006:130). But whether one chooses to see the Stonewall riots as *the* historical moment in gay and lesbian history, or one moment among several, "coming out" and proudly self-identifying as gay or lesbian became important for this generation. It was not until the late 1970s, after the riots, that the concept of "sexual orientation" appeared. The trend "toward a one-issue, identity-based reform politics" increased, creating the understanding of gays and lesbians as a social minority group similar to those based on ethnicity (Benshoff and Griffin, 2004:4; Piontek, 2006:21). But the 1970s saw a separation of the lesbian and gay forces as many of the politically active groups split into separate political

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[7] There has been drawn a connection between this change to fighting back and the death of gay icon and movie star Judy Garland earlier the same week (Benshoff and Griffin, 2006). It is hard to say whether this indeed was a contributing factor, but if this is the case it would be an indication of how much movies have the potential to influence our lives and our "identities".

[8] Some such "movements" were the organised groups of lesbians and gay men like the Mattachine Society of New York and the Daughters of Bilitis (Piontek, 2006:16).

and social spheres. Also, during the 1970s we saw the awakening of gay and lesbian film studies. The activist groups started paying more attention to, and criticising, media representations, and they started lobbying for better and more accurate representations (Benshoff and Griffin, 2004:4,10).

During the 1980s gay men and lesbians were again brought together as the AIDS crisis struck. During their fight up until the 1980s many activists had used the essentialist argument that lesbians and gay men were "born that way", contributing to an understanding of sexuality as fixed. This had been a work against heteronormativity, but it fixed new categories, and contributed in making homosexuals a target for Christian fundamentalists. The religious extremists argued in favour of AIDS as the gay plague (Ibid., 4-5).

The 1980s began to see a new direction, with social constructionism as the dominating view within lesbian and gay studies. While essentialism is the view that all people and objects have a true essence and they possess certain properties, social constructionism considers categories like man/woman or heterosexual/homosexual to be the results of complicated social and historical processes (Rosenberg, 2002:23-25). With such new views on gender and sexuality leading up to the introduction of *queer* in the 1990s, I will now turn my focus towards the representations of homosexual/gay men in film. Subsequently I will pick up this thread as we move into the 1990s and *queer* territory.

#### 2.4.2.4 HOMOSEXUALITY IN FILM

The film medium and the modern understanding of sexuality are both concepts of the latter part of the nineteenth century. They have developed together, and looking at film history we can therefore trace the development of society's views on sexuality. But it is important to distinguish film from reality. The cinematic representations of sexuality are mere *mediations* of the film makers' understanding of sexuality. One might even perceive gender and sexuality within film as *cinematic categories*, following their own cinematic conventions. Still, film is a product of society, and society's believes and thoughts are reflected in its cultural products. Additionally, during history laws of censorship have controlled what images were released to the public. Films are important historical documents, but they must be viewed critically, and must be interpreted with an understanding of social history.

The gay rights movements have come a long way in their work, but gay or queer themes still just slowly seep into the heteronormative mainstream cinema. David Bordwell writes about the norms expressed in Hollywood movies, and he bases his comments on literary theoretic and aesthetician Jan Mukařovský when he says: "classical cinema draws upon practical or ethico-socio-political norms […] For example, heterosexual romance is one value in American society, but that value takes on an aesthetic function in the classical cinema (as, say, the typical motivation for the principal line of action)" (Bordwell et al., [1985] 2004:5). When heterosexuality is such a "natural" and incorporated value in Hollywood movies, it is difficult to introduce alternatives. Of course this is attempted from time, but then usually within a heterosexual framework.

A factor that contributes to the restriction of homosexual visibility in film is the fact that "[u]nlike the social categories of race, age, gender, or disability, sexual orientation has few (if any) physical markers that the visual medium of film can exploit. Thus Hollywood filmmakers fell back on connotative means to suggest that a character was queer […] these connotative means usually rely on stereotypes that invert traditional expectations about gender" (Benshoff and Griffin, 2006:14-15). Then, even more than it is today, such gender inversion was connected to the term homosexuality. "Screen homosexuals", the stereotypical images, used this inversion of gender. It ought to be added that this was not necessarily a negative image—it was the images of men who were women on the inside, they were feminine men.

Already in the very earliest silent films there were depictions of "homosexuals", such as men dressed as women and women dressed as men. Such images were familiar from a previous dramatic medium, theatre, where mistaken identity and humour based on gender confusion have been popular. The character of the effeminate man became popular, and by the 1920 the "pansy" was a much depicted character. Benshoff and Griffin suggest that this stereotype did not only figure in *films* by this time, but also in real-life New York City. They add that the pansy stereotype might very well be considered a more *queer* than *homosexual*, since his (homo)sexuality is never made manifest, but is rather just hinted at (Benshoff and Griffin, 2006:24,26).

One such early "pansy" is particularly relevant to this thesis. As early as in 1923 the world was introduced to a cinematic mediation of a "gay cowboy".

> One of the earliest direct references to male homosexuality in American film came, predictably, in a comedy spoof. Stan Laurel's one-reel comedy short *The Soilers* (1923) was a takeoff on Rex Beach's popular 1914 western *The Spoilers*. […] Most of the action consists of a drawn-out fight scene between Laurel and the sheriff, who brawl the entire length of an old-time saloon. During the fight, an ordinary-looking cowboy flounces gaily onto the set, hand on hip. He bats his eyes at both men, fluffs his hair before the mirror and primps a bit before sashaying out of the room as the two men continue to fight. Laurel beats the villain, but nobody seems to care, and he ends up sitting dejectedly outside the saloon, his face buried in his hands. They gay cowboy pokes his head out of a second-floor window and extravagantly blows Laurel a kiss, mouthing the words "My hero" (reinforced by a flowered title card). When Laurel spurns him with a disgusted wave of his hand, the miffed cowboy drops a potted petunia on his head. In the final shot, the street cleaner sweeps Laurel away with the trash (Russo, [1981] 1987:25-26).

Russo adds that this was one of the first uses of the "harmless sissy" image to present homosexuality. He underlines that in this case the homosexual is "ordinary-looking", like "any other cowboy in the film", but he acts like a woman, in that he prefers men (Ibid., 26).

Then, during the 1930s, cinematic homosexuals vanished from plain view. Hollywood issued the Production Code, and forbade sexual "perversion". The Production Code was highly restrictive and prohibited the showing, or even mentioning, of almost everything concerning sex and crime. The mere suggestion of illicit sex or seduction needed to be absolutely essential to the plot to be allowed, and then punished at the end. Any implication of "sexual aberration", all sorts of nudity, and even lustful kissing was prohibited. In general the sanctity of the institution of marriage was to be upheld (Cook, [1981] 1996:282) , and consequently, the depiction of homosexuality was near to impossible during the years of the Code.

The circumstances leading up to the establishment of the Code included the Hollywood producers' fear of scandals and their wish to reassure the religious and right-wing pressure groups who were afraid that the film medium would corrupt the American youth. In 1922 the producers formed a self-regulatory organisation, the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America (MPPDA), today known as the Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA) as it changed its name in 1945. With the arrival of the sound film in the late 1920s, the conservative groups increased their pressure on the movie industry. They considered film to possess an even more corrupting potential with its sounds of violence and vulgar language. This brought about the Production Code in 1934 as a form of self-censorship. Due to several contributory factors the Code basically became unenforceable by the mid-fifties. Some of these factors were the rise of independent productions, increased import of non-American films, competition from television, the decline of the studio system, and the studios' loss of control over the distributors and theatres. Film sought to keep its audience by including more adult content, and the Code was revised several times to allow for

more and more, until 1968, when the Code was replaced by the MPAA ratings system (Benshoff and Griffin, 2006:37; Cook, [1981] 1996:214-217, 274, 282, 510-514).

During the reign of the Code, queer characters were not *completely* absent, though. The "pansy" still appeared, but was now transformed into a rather asexual sissy, taking the edge off the representation. Also, despite the difficulty, films with "queer" characters did indeed slip past the Production Code Administration. The "gay subculture" developed its own "codes" and language, and various forms of subtle hinting, vague references, certain lines or character traits slipped by the Administration unfamiliar with the codes (Benshoff and Griffin, 2006:30-32).

As we moved further into the time of the Production Code, and the Code was revised to allow for more explicit content, the queer characters of Hollywood films changed. During the 1940s the "sissies" were often victims (Russo, [1981] 1987:59), but the post-war era can be seen as a transition period. From having depicted homosexual men as silly and feminine they now begun to move away from representing homosexuality as gender inversion, and increasingly film homosexuals were becoming villainous, strange, sick, and generally dangerous. But as long as the "perverted" was the enemy, and took its punishment, the Code could accept the portrayal (Benshoff and Griffin, 2006:35, 37). Homophobia has been, and still is, all too common (in films and in society) and films sold tickets when they punished sexual "deviance", or represented gays and lesbians as monsters or villains. The revisions of the Code allowing for more "queer" content expected the queer characters to be punished, preferably killed, at the end of the movie (Ibid., 90).

In 1961 the Code was revised to allow homosexual subject matter and other "perversities" on screen (Benshoff and Griffin, 2006:86-87; Russo, [1981] 1987), and "[o]nce homosexuality had become literally speakable in the early 1960s, gays dropped like flies, usually by their own hand, while continuing to perform their classically comic function […]" (Russo, [1981] 1987:52). Then, throughout the 1960s, attitudes changed. "[T]he entire concept of sissy had become distanced from the humorous and had become just a little deadly. For attitudes toward queerness were shifting because men were going off to war. All male behaviour suddenly seemed to be strongly suspect" (Ibid., 59). The sissies and dykes became mean throughout the 1960s, and towards the end of the 1960s and during the 1970s violence against homosexuals on film increased and Russo describes it as a "kill 'em or cure 'em climate" (Ibid., 154, 162).

On the independent, "alternative" and art scene (referring to American non-Hollywood productions) Andy Warhol and the "pop art movement" grew to become influential during the 1960s. Warhol was a prominent figure within the underground, avant-garde film scene, where he experimented with the film medium. Warhol's films were often radical in both content and form, but some of them even reached mainstream audiences (Benshoff and Griffin, 2006:121; Bordwell and Thompson, 1994:590-596). Warhol even released his own underground "gay cowboy movie", *Lonesome Cowboys,* in December 1968 (*Release Dates for Lonesome Cowboys*), the very year before *Midnight Cowboy* was released.

The late 1960s were a time of change, both in film and in society. Within these cultural conditions, in 1968, the reign of the Code came to an end, and the rating system that the USA still have today, or the "alphabet soup" as Russo dubs it, came into being (Russo, [1981] 1987:163). As 1969 was the year of the Stonewall riots, more and more gay activist groups emerged, and they concerned themselves with cinematic representations. In 1973 gay activists and the movie and television industry met to discuss how homosexuals were treated on-screen (Ibid., 220-221). With more awareness of (homo)sexuality, a lot of gay men wanted to distance themselves from the stereotypes and the world saw a rise of the macho style among gay men in the 1970s. Even though this might have been an effort to distance themselves from the stereotypes, this became new gay expressions, yet other stereotypes. One of these stereotypes is referred to as "the clone". He is "the Marlboro Man", a version of hyper-masculinity based on the cowboy (Piontek, 2006:58), but there are also other versions , like "bears", with big, hairy bodies; the oiled and sleek gym bodies; or the gay men of the leather culture. The disco group Village People, which formed in the late 1970s, are examples of this gay hyper-masculinity. Taking the signs of masculinity and eroticizing them in a homosexual context had an impact on the way men and masculinity was perceived. Even beer drinking, bearded men can be "pansies" (Lang, 2002:147).

Though the AIDS crisis, starting in the 1980s, struck the gay and lesbian communities hard, Hollywood acted ignorantly of the ongoing crisis. Not until 1993, with *Philadelphia*, did Hollywood address the issue. It seemed like Hollywood felt it safer to avoid the "issue" of homosexuality altogether, or they returned to the representations of the harmless sissies. To offer an alternative, gay men and lesbians took matters in their own hands and made their own movies independent of Hollywood. On the independent scene, therefore, the images of sexualities and genders in various forms and shapes flourish.

Some films still rely on externalised inversions of gender expressions to communicate homosexuality. But seeing as sexuality has mostly to do with feelings, this is difficult to translate to film. Hollywood is still very conservative and reluctant to portray the actual practice of sex between two (or more) men, which is indeed very visual. In stereotyping it seems to boil down to identity. This is what mainstream portrayals of homosexuality tries to mediate, and the solution they seem most comfortable with is the one they came up with over a hundred years ago, to portray homosexual men as stereotypically feminine and lesbian women as stereotypically masculine.

I have addressed what kinds of representations of homosexuals have emerged, what kinds of stereotypes, and their function in films, but how are they created cinematically? This is something I will explore during this thesis. The actual mediation of sexuality is not something Vito Russo addresses, as far as I can tell, but Benshoff and Griffin have addressed this. They write that to be made recognisable the gay stereotypes can be created by *dialogue* ("it's said he likes flowers"); *delivery* (lisp, flip of the wrist); *queer names; costume, makeup, hair; props;* and *music* (Benshoff and Griffin, 2006:15-16). Homosexuals in movies and other media often appear as one, collective, homogenous group, but as I have made visible through this historical account, there are different gay stereotypes, and they have changed over time.

I now turn to look at queer theory and some of the developments in studies on sexuality in film since its emergence. This choice that I have made, to first introduce "gay and lesbian film history" separately from the following account of "queer film", is made based on the chronological developments of these fields. I have chosen to lay this out presenting the historical development, arriving at queer just before I turn to the objects of study.

## 2.5 QUEER THEORY: BREAKING OUT OF THE BOX

I have given an introduction to how we sort experiences in categories, how categories shape our view and our expectations, and how expectations prepare us for acting and reacting, but what if something does not fit in any category we know? What if we know the categories and the rules of the system, but then something does not follow the rules? Now that is … queer.

Already in the 1940s Alfred C. Kinsey saw how the existing categories of heterosexual and homosexual did not seem to be sufficiently describing human sexuality, and he posed new suggestions to how to structure sexuality. The famous Kinsey reports, *Sexual Behavior in the*

*Human Male* (1948) and *Sexual Behavior in the Human Female* (1953), revealed that 10 percent of the men "identified as primarily homosexual, that up to 37 percent had had homosexual experience to orgasm, and that 50 percent had experienced erotic responses to their own sex" (Benshoff and Griffin, 2006:88). Kinsey's work was indeed *queer* in suggesting that "human sexuality was not an either-or proposition but rather needed to be understood as a continuum of fantasies, desires, and behaviors" (Ibid.). Kinsey introduced a sliding scale upon which individuals were placed according to how homosexual and heterosexual they were. The scale went from 0 to 6 with a "Kinsey six" completely on the "homosexual" side of the scale. This helped shift the understanding of homosexuality from gender inversion to one of object choice (Ibid.). But Kinsey's reports increased public unease, suspicion and paranoia. Since homosexuals could look like any other person they could now be anywhere. With the belief that a homosexual was an effeminate man at least it was possible to "see" homosexuality (Ibid., 15).

In *The Homosexual Role* (1968) Mary McIntosh questioned the perception of homosexuality as a "condition", and suggested that it should be seen as a social role. At this point the category of "bisexual" had been introduced to capture those not completely homosexual and not completely heterosexual—those in-between. McIntosh refers to a psychiatrist on how he diagnosed the people who did not fit in the one category or the other when she writes: "Along with many other writers, he introduces the notion of a third type of person, the "bisexual", to handle the fact that behavior patterns cannot be conveniently dichotomised into heterosexual and homosexual. But this does not solve the conceptual problem, since bisexuality too is seen as a condition" (McIntosh, 1968:182-183). McIntosh was criticising these limiting categorical terms of sexuality at an early date. Her critical stand to the sexual categories and the classification of homosexuality (and bisexuality) as a "condition" resembles what would later be known as queer theory.

*Queer theory* dates back to the early 1990s, and much like feminism it has roots both in activism and academia. Queer theory stems from the post-Stonewall gay and lesbian rights movements, discussions within lesbian feminist theory and gay studies on the dominating and unique position heterosexuality held in Western society as "natural", and identity politics (Rosenberg, 2002:13). Queer theory is associated with the post-structural deconstructionism and category criticism in working to undo and challenge existing conceptual categories of sexuality, undermine the traditional notions of sexual identity, and push against the fixing of

indexical systems. Queer can be seen to combine postmodern thinking, poststructuralist theory, and identity and sexual politics (Benshoff and Griffin, 2004:5; Stacey and Street, 2007:1, 9). Queer is therefore not only theoretical, but also practical and political. Though many activists started using the term as an inclusive term describing various sexual identities and behaviours in a broad sense (Benshoff and Griffin, 2004:5), within queer theory the term *queer* is usually not used about identities the same way (Rosenberg, 2002:15). Tiina Rosenberg considers it crucial that queer as *theory* does not lose its connection to *activism*. According to Rosenberg, queer needs to be critical even of the academic. With queer theory as a tool the academic should produce papers and lectures as contributions to queer activism (Ibid., 19).

Queer defies definition, and paradoxically stated the term *queer* is by definition indefinable. According to Rosenberg the object of queer was to break with categories, not be turned into one, and she harshly states that defining queer would be its death (Ibid., 11). The term is difficult to define, and there is not one definition, but according to Don Kulick, professor of anthropology, *queer*

> was not conceived as a category of identity in the way that 'gay' was; what it signified was more a set of cultural-political positions, one of which, in fact, was being critical of the kind of identity politics represented by both the gay and the feminist movements during the late 1980s and 1990s. Queer activism was informed by queer theory […], an important strand in which was a sustained critique of the concept of 'identity', and the essentialist assumptions on which it depended (Cameron and Kulick, 2003:28).

Kulick admits he uses the past tense because the term queer has gained additional uses and meanings over time (Ibid.). Rosenberg sums up Kulick's definition of *queer* as a critical attitude towards the normative (Rosenberg, 2002:12).

In the early 1990s queer theory started asking a lot of new questions about the existing categories and concepts of gender and sexuality (Ibid., 15), and Judith Butler's book *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (Butler, [1990] 2007) can be seen as one of the founding works of queer theory. Gay studies had also criticised the heteronormative, but Heidi Eng, scholar in gender and sexuality studies, expresses a concern about gay studies and their view on homosexuality as an unambiguous identity. By focusing on homosexuality, a homosexual "way of life", and homosexuality as a group identity, the categories "homo" and "hetero" are maintained, keeping this artificial division between "us" and "them". This concern is a queer inspired one, and though queer theory might have developed from gay and

lesbian studies, it is simultaneously an alternative and a critique to the gay studies of the 1980s and -90s (Eng in Lorentzen and Mühleisen, 2006:139).

### 2.5.1 QUEER FILM

Queer film studies are largely built upon the contributions of feminist and queer theorists, but as introduced in the first chapter, queer film studies did not emerge mainly from theorists or books, as was the case in many other fields. Rather it sprang out of discussions and studies of certain films and film makers (Kaplan in Gabbard and Luhr, 2008:26; Stacey and Street, 2007:1, 3-4). From the mid 1980s "there was an explosion of gay/lesbian film festivals, prompting more research, criticism, and questioning of methods and categories" (Kaplan in Gabbard and Luhr, 2008:26), but what kick-started the queer branch of film studies was the new 1990s "wave" of independent films experimenting with film form and sexuality: The New Queer Cinema. These films emerged from the very early 1990s, fuelled by 1980s AIDS activism. They were postmodern in both ideas and aesthetic style, and like queer theory, they questioned the essentialist understanding of gendered and sexual identity. These films crossed formal boundaries, merging or experimenting with styles and genres (Benshoff and Griffin, 2004:11). B. Ruby Rich coined the phrase "New Queer Cinema" in an article addressing this new trend in 1992 (Rich in Benshoff and Griffin, 2004). Her article and the debates on New Queer Cinema in general are usually considered the starting point of queer film (studies). Studies of queer film have therefore developed alongside other branches of queer theory since the early 1990s.

Queer film studies provide valuable insight into representations (old and new) that are not completely "straight" or "normal". This includes, but is not limited to, characters that are "coded" explicitly as gay or lesbian. Gabbard and Luhr states that with queer theory, film studies have been provided with tools to interpret and understand movies that were released during the time of the Production Code. Looking at such movies today, it is possible to read these movies looking at the codes applied by "closeted gays and lesbians" during the time their representation were forbidden in film (Gabbard and Luhr, 2008:9).

The term "queer film" is used as a description of certain movies, but in queer tradition, I am sceptical of such a paradoxical "queer category" of films. Queer film is not a genre or a distinct category of films, but Benshoff and Griffin suggest different ways in which films can be considered queer. They state how characters and authorship can "queer" a film, and that a

film can also be queer by virtue of its genre. They include the spectator in the act of queering a movie, and add that the act of experiencing film very well can be seen as queer in itself (Benshoff and Griffin, 2004; Benshoff and Griffin, 2006:9-12). In the following paragraphs I elaborate on these different queer "criteria":

- *Characters* can make a film queer, but a film is not necessarily queer because a character is. Such a character can just as well have been introduced to act as a comic relief or to induce homophobic jokes. Benshoff and Griffin therefore state that the character must engage with queer issues in a meaningful way.
- A*uthorship:* This refers to the writers, director and producers, and it also includes actors. Authorship can influence the film and make it "queer" even when the work does not have an explicit queer theme or characters.
- S*pectator*: Films have a queer potential that can be recognised and released by a certain viewing position[9].
- T*ypes of films / film genres*: Certain genres can be considered queer, like horror films, which can depict strange or terrible sexualities; science fiction and fantasy, which can introduce new kinds of identities and sexualities, usually not as negative as those in the horror film; the Hollywood musical where anything is possible; and the animation film, where the borders between reality and fiction are blurred. There are also other, non-Hollywood productions, like documentaries, the avant-garde, and various independent productions.
- *The act of experiencing film*: Looking at the characters and identifying with them is queer behaviour.

Benshoff and Griffin add that these points overlap and at times they blur together (Benshoff and Griffin, 2006:9-12).

Queer as theory and queer films challenge and criticise normative heterosexuality, and seek to reveal the unstable performativity of identity. I consider it important to have a critical, queer approach to mainstream film, since they usually reinforce heteronormativity. Benshoff and Griffin emphasise that films teach us how to be and they contribute in shaping our

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[9] Again I introduce a stand that answers Patrick Phillips' two last questions to characterisation and the position of the spectator in relation to the character/film, as Benshoff and Griffin suggest an active part on the spectator's side in *queering* a film.

understanding (of mediations but also of the real world) it is therefore important to study (queer) film history to reveal what we are lead to believe (Ibid., 2). Both the heteronormative and the few cases where non-hetero sexualities are represented need to be examined, and in this thesis I study two mainstream films that in fact offer non-heteronormative representations.

## 2.6 THE OBJECTS OF STUDY: THE FILMS

My objects of study in this thesis are the movies *Midnight Cowboy* and *Brokeback Mountain.* The two movies have a lot in common, and a lot that sets them apart, as I will go into during this thesis. When looking to compare *Brokeback Mountain,* I find *Midnight Cowboy* to be an "obvious" choice to point back to; they portray male protagonists who have sex with other men, in both cases these protagonists dress as cowboys, and male identity and sexuality can be said to be important themes. Both films are set in the 1960s, both did well at the Academy Award's of their respective years, and on the whole they have been received favourably by critics and audiences. *Midnight Cowboy* was released in 1969, at the time the film portrays. *Brokeback Mountain* also portrays the 1960s, and a consecutive period of twenty years, but was released in 2005. Both films are adapted literary works but I do not take the literary works into account in my analysis of the films. The novel *Midnight Cowboy* (Herlihy, [1965] 2003) by James Leo Herlihy was released in 1965, and the short story *Brokeback Mountain* (Proulx, [1999] 2006) by Annie Proulx was originally published in *The New Yorker*, and was later published in a collection of short stories in 1999.

A criterion when I chose these films was that they should be mainstream movies. *Mainstream* is a loose term and I will not attempt to define it, but I will provide some of the reasons why I consider these movies to be "mainstream". *Brokeback Mountain* is a studio production with Paramount Studios as one of the studios behind it (Company Credits for Brokeback Mountain, *IMDb*) . Even though *Midnight Cowboy* was produced independently (no major studio was involved in production) it has, like *Brokeback Mountain,* been widely distributed and is therefore easily available, also in Norway (Company Credits for Midnight Cowboy, *IMDb*). Among their award achievements were their many Academy Award nominations and wins. I will not claim that "Oscar movies" necessarily reflect the interests of the American society, but I will suggest that movies with multiple of the most prestigious award nominations and wins might indicate what people of the time is interested in watching, and what are considered "good movies" at the time.

*Brokeback Mountain* won three Academy Awards, among them it received honours for best directing and best writing (for adapted screenplay). In addition it was nominated for five other Oscars, e.g. best picture of the year. *Midnight Cowboy* in its time also won three awards—for best directing, best picture and best writing (for screenplay based on material from another medium)—and it received four additional nominations (The Official Academy Award Database). The movies are considered good movies based on well written books, and they contain well written characters. Additionally, both protagonists in both movies were nominated to an Academy Award for best acting. The actors playing the protagonists are Jon Voight as Joe Buck, Dustin Hoffman as Rico "Ratso" Rizzo, Heath Ledger as Ennis Del Mar, and Jake Gyllenhaal as Jack Twist.

There is a lot of other interesting queer material outside the mainstream American film or Hollywood. Non-American films and the American independent scene provide varied pictures of queer characters, and there is a lot of queer material within television, like *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy, The L Word* and *Will & Grace*. Another choice I have made in selecting these particular movies is to focus on men. There are also a lot of fascinating representations of lesbians, but this thesis does not have the capacity to address this material, and I have had to make my choices and limitations.

# CHAPTER 3
# ANALYSIS

## 3.1 MEDIATING SEXUALITY

In my introductory chapter I ask the question "How is the sexuality of the protagonists mediated?" In answering this question I look at what the films do—how the mediation of sexuality is carried out cinematically. I look at characteristics distinctive of the film medium, and also at characterisation in general. With the various elements of cinematic characterisation, the complexity of sexuality, and the different ways of expressing sex/gender, this makes for a complex multidimensional matrix.

Based on what sexuality is made up of—feelings (desire/attraction and love), behaviour, and identity—I study how these various dimensions are expressed in these movies. The dimensions of sexuality are connected to each other, and as human emotions are complex, various feelings are not always possible to distinguish from each other. I will emphasise that I do not try and "define" the characters' sexuality, but rather look at how the different dimensions of their sexuality is mediated. In addition to their sexuality I also examine how the characters are presented as *gendered*.

As introduced, Patrick Phillips offers a systematic way of analysing character, and I look at these aspects of mediation—the visual, dialogue and performance—when analysing the protagonists. Among the visual aspects to consider is "the physical person and what they wear; their pose; and the animation they bring to the shoot" (Phillips, 2000:66). The different elements of characterisation are connected, since for instance the dialogue and a lot of the visual will have to be performed. These particular means of characterisation are some of the most important when communicating character in film, and they are also utilised to reveal the inner life of the characters. Certain dimensions of sexuality are precisely *inner life*, and are not visible on the body per se. Films then need to rely on various ways and traditions of expressing feelings externally (Phillips, 2000:69, 70, 75). In addition to exploring these dimensions of character mediation I also seek to find how sexuality can be mediated through other means than these relating specifically to character. Some of the cinematic techniques I will examine are the soundtrack, mise-en-scene, and cinematography.

In the analysis I first study *Midnight Cowboy* and then I turn to *Brokeback Mountain.* In both cases I first give a summary of the film to provide a narrative and developmental mapping. Then I move to studying the characters and their sexuality, going through both plots chronologically, studying scenes that mediate their sexuality. I examine the various relationships the protagonists are engaged in, considering the people that in some way help shape their sexuality, or the viewer's impression of their sexuality. I study both protagonists in *Brokeback Mountain*, Ennis Del Mar and Jack Twist, but in *Midnight Cowboy* I focus on Joe Buck. I only mention Ratso Rizzo where he adds something to my analysis of Joe. In this chapter I examine the three protagonists and discuss scenes consecutively, and in the next chapter I return to some of the aspects I bring up during this chapter, compare and contrast the two movies, and also look at them in a wider, social context.

During the analysis I frequently quote dialogue from the films to illustrate how certain traits of character and sexuality are mediated through dialogue. Wherever I have inserted dialogue within quotation marks or as a larger piece of a scene with descriptions of action, the quotation is from the film currently being studied.

## 3.2 *MIDNIGHT COWBOY*: JOE BUCK

Joe Buck, a young Texan, feels he is destined for more than cleaning dishes in a local restaurant, and he leaves for New York City to make a living off wealthy women by being a hustler. When he arrives in New York he is clearly unaccustomed to the ways of city life, but he is positive and approaches every situation with confidence. His first "hustling" experience is a failure. He picks up a woman, they go to her apartment and have sex, but when he expects to get paid she flips the situation and he ends up giving *her* money.

Joe meets the street-wise Rico "Ratso" Rizzo, who says he will help Joe. The naïve Joe gives him money, but Ratso sets him up and disappears. As Joe does not have much money it soon runs out, he is thrown out of his hotel and ends up on the street. To earn some money he goes to a late night theatre and lets a young man perform fellatio on him during a movie screening. The man has no money, so Joe is left with nothing, this time as well. When Joe spots Ratso again he gets furious. Ratso looks dirtier this time, he has a bad cough, and all he has left of the money he got from Joe is 64 cents. Ratso had probably considered Joe to be "easy money", but when he understands that Joe is also in a bad state, he invites him to live with him in an abandoned apartment house (with no heat or electricity).

Joe and Ratso seem to get by, but they have very little money. They do every-day things their own way and they quarrel like a married couple. They try to con people, but they are not particularly successful. Winter approaches and their apartment gets so cold icicles hang from the water tap and their food is frozen solid. In this cold weather Ratso's coughing gets worse. Joe does what he can to earn money, like donating blood, but the pay is rather bad.

One day Joe is invited to a party by two strangers. When Joe and Ratso arrive at the party Ratso seems sicker than ever and even struggles walking. Ratso uses the opportunity to eat as much as he can, he steals food, and he steals money from the guests. Joe on the other hand meets a woman and they agree he will go home with her. Ratso steps in as his manager and sets the price: 20 dollars. Joe and the woman are about to leave when Ratso's legs fail him on the stairway and he falls. Joe is concerned, but leaves with the woman. When we see Joe and the woman in her apartment it becomes apparent that he could not perform sexually. They decide to play a word game instead. When she comes up with the word "gay" she asks if that is his problem. He throws her back at the bed and they have aggressive sex.

Finally Joe has some money again and returns to Ratso with medicines. Ratso is in a bad state, and admits, shamefully, that he cannot walk anymore. He is scared. Joe wants to find a doctor, but Ratso refuses. He rather wants them to go to Florida, so Joe goes out to find the money. He meets an older man and returns with him to his hotel room. Once there the man seems to regret bringing Joe. The man is miserable, and reveals that he has issues with his life and sexuality. Joe wants his money, but when the man does not give him what he asks for, he beats him up and takes all he has got.

Joe and Ratso leave for Florida. On the way Joe gets them new, colourful clothes, he seems very positive, and he has plans for their new life. But just minutes before they reach Miami, Joe discovers that Ratso is actually dead beside him in the seat. Joe completes the journey to Florida with his arms around his friend.

### 3.2.1 INTRODUCING JOE BUCK

The film opens with a white screen. On the soundtrack we hear yelling and hooting, horses galloping, and guns shooting. The sounds we hear are all recurring and familiar sounds from the western genre, and therefore, with these sounds the film sets the mood. These cues direct the viewer's thoughts towards the western and start shaping expectations (Bordwell and

Thompson, [1979] 1997:69)—that is, if the viewer has knowledge of the western genre. Without knowledge of the genre, this, and subsequent cues, will not shape the same expectations or give the same meaning. Familiarity with the western genre is a premise to my interpretations both of *Midnight Cowboy* and *Brokeback Mountain* as I place these movies in an intertextual relationship with the western genre (Ibid.). As such the film's "meaning" changes according to the viewer's intertextual knowledge.

The camera zooms out, tilts down, and reveals that what we initially saw is the canvas at a drive-in-movie. What is revealed to be non-diegetic[10] western sounds are playing while we see an empty drive-in movie canvas. This might point towards the western as a dated genre, or it might be a comment on the artificial nature of the western, of the genre system, or even of film in general as a medium. A few horses stand below this huge canvas and a child wearing a cowboy hat is rocking on a toy horse. The sounds fade out. Now we hear the wind and the squeaking from the springs on the toy horse. The camera keeps zooming out. These images keep some of the familiar icons of the western, but at the same time they distance themselves from the classic western in depicting the child wearing a cowboy hat on the toy horse, and the empty canvas with the accompanying non-diegetic western score. This way the film keeps the viewer's mind set on the western genre, but introduces a more complex relationship to the genre, a self-reflexive or "baroque" relationship. During this very short introductory shot the observant viewer's expectations to the movie and its relationship to genre have in all likelihood gone through changes already, just during this zooming out manoeuvre.

Then we hear a man singing: "Whoopee ti yi yo, git along little doggies […]". This is Joe Buck. The very first time we see him he is in the shower, naked. He starts out naked—genuine and natural—and then he dresses up. Joe puts on his new cowboy hat and his new, shining pair of black boots with gold details; both hat and boots come straight from the box. He even puts the hat on before he has removed his towel. He dons his cowboy shirt, his fringed leather jacket, and he admires his reflection in the mirror. He puts on an act, both for the camera and for the mirror, and he apparently puts on a persona.

In his book *Masculine Interests* Robert Lang suggests that this sequence shows how Joe has a need to be seen, admired, and loved (Lang, 2002:149-150), and he emphasises the frequent

[10] These are sounds that are not part of the story world, or not present in the action.

use of mirrors and mirroring scenes in the film. Though I acknowledge the use of such scenes, and I even return to the use of such scenes later and in my analysis of *Brokeback Mountain*, I will rather reference Lang's chapter on *Midnight Cowboy* in *Masculine Interests* on this matter, and declare that though this might reveal important aspect of Joe and his identity, I will not dwell much on this hereafter. Lang's approach to the movie is more of a psychoanalytical one, and as *Midnight Cowboy* frequently offers glimpses into Joe's childhood and often connects scenes from his childhood, his young adult life and the present, this is in a sense an obvious choice of theoretical perspective (Lang, 2002), but as my goal is not to try an sort Joe's "real" sexuality how he came to be "this way", I do not see this as crucial to my study. I will rather refer to Lang's article for further reading on this subject.

All that has happened in the movie so far takes place during the pre-credits sequence and establishes Joe. Through the boots, the hat and the shirt he is coded with traditional western apparel, western iconography, indicating masculinity. But at the same time, to the critical and analysing viewer, the movie maintains the play on genre. His western clothes are brand new; Joe has apparently just bought them, and he dresses up in this manner, admiring himself. To me this suggests that the film expresses an ambiguity in Joe's gender identity since he dresses in "masculine" clothing, but he exaggerates in his attempt, and he acts "feminine" in vainly admiring himself and taking his time, indulging in his clothes and his reflection.

### 3.2.2 LEAVING FOR NEW YORK

Joe leaves Texas with the intention of earning money hustling rich women. Before he leaves, when he is asked by a colleague what he is going to do in New York, he says: "A lot of rich women there, Ralph. Begging for it. Paying for it too! […] And the men they're mostly tutti-fruttis." By saying this Joe appears as a male chauvinist. He views women, and sex, as a source of income. His reference to the men being "tutti-fruttis" does not seem to indicate any hostility; he rather appears to consider them as making the situation easier for him. There will not be much competition. Additionally, this underlines that this is something that *he* is *not.* He distances himself from these men by labelling them already before he has left Texas.

While Joe rides the bus to New York there is a montage sequence with mental subjective images suggesting he has had a sexual relationship with a girl named Annie: In the beginning of the sequence Annie is wearing a white dress, running in slow-motion through a field (Figure 1, page 54). This might suggest that at this point he has a glorified image of her as

innocent or pure. In voice-over Annie repeats the question whether he loves her, moving on to repeating he is "the only one". This develops into her claiming that he is "better than the rest of them", suggesting that he is not so much the "only one" anymore, as one of many, whereupon we see her wearing black. Maybe he does not see her as innocent anymore. Joe and a group of boys are looking at her eagerly, or covetously. Joe is looking pleased and amused within the group of men (Figure 2). I find it difficult to define Joe's place in this situation. We see his images of Annie, his focus on her, but at the same time we see him as one of the boys, looking at Annie. When we see Annie being chased by the boys through a desert, I see this as an invitation to interpreting the scene metaphorically rather than literally. The boys, Joe inclusive, are chasing her and she trips and stumbles as she runs away. The sequence then changes this progress of narrative to showing Annie in white again, then showing Annie and Joe having sex.

**Figure 1** Close-up of Joe on bus to New York, fading to mental subjective images of Annie in a white dress.

**Figure 2** The boys looking at Annie, Joe is among them (mental subjectivity).

I am lead to assume that these images are in Joe's mind since the sequence keeps returning to close-up images of Joe on the bus, as if (re)establishing that these are his thoughts. Such images of mental subjectivity are frequent during the movie, as memories, fantasies and dreams. Bordwell and Thompson introduce two kinds of subjective imagery: The kind used in this particular sequence, *mental subjectivity*, where we experience something that goes on inside the character's mind; and *perceptual subjectivity*, where we get to access what the character sees or hears[11] (Bordwell and Thompson, 2008). Though this resembles a flashback,

[11] Bordwell and Thompson address subjectivity in *Film Art: An Introduction* (Bordwell and Thompson, [1979] 1997), but they have recognised how this is troublesome terrain, and elaborate on the subject in a blog article posted on *David Bordwell's Website on Cinema* (Bordwell and Thompson, 2008).

a memory, the shots within the sequence are objective. We do not see this from Joe's point of view as he is also present. These are conventions we as viewers have grown to accept from flashbacks, even though they are supposed to be the memories of a character (Ibid.).

Presuming that this indeed shows Joe's past, we can view this as part of Joe's back-story (Lang, 2002). Still, being critical to the subjective images, we cannot know if this is really what happened, if this is just something he fantasises about, or even if this is how he remembers the situations though it did not really happen like this. Thomas Piontek makes a point to recognise the difference between fantasies and "reality". He writes about this as he addresses sexual fantasies and S/M. If this is indeed Joe fantasising rather than remembering, according to how I understand Piontek, that would not define Joe's identity; they are mere fantasies and must be distinguished from reality (Piontek, 2006:84-85). But, in applying mental subjectivity in this sequence, we are in fact allowed to *see* what he thinks about; we are allowed access to his mind. That in turn affects with how we view his (sexual) identity. Subjective imagery has the potential of engaging the viewer and involving her emotionally in the character (Bordwell and Thompson, 2008), and when we get to see Joe's thoughts we are involved in a part of his inner life—whether memories, false memories, or fantasies.

This sequence brings up the question of whom or what he is actually thinking of. Is he thinking about Annie, and being with her? Is he thinking about himself in these situations, since we see him partake in the sequence? In such a case, is he thinking about himself as being *one of the guys,* or is he really thinking of the *boys*, and not being one of them, but being *with* them? These questions are especially important when considering that he has sex with Annie during this sequence. Then the questions rather become: When they have sex, does he actually have feelings for *her*, or is this just a game to please his friends because he cares for *them*? I do not see any easy answers to these questions. Though Joe seems to have had sex with Annie, his feelings, or his allegiance, is hard to place. This sequence is important in showing the complexity of his sexuality, and the complexity of Joe as a character. We do not know the motivation for his thoughts, or if his thoughts are even rooted in reality. However, whether his thoughts are about *them* or *her*, this sequence and its narrative position makes it about *Joe*, and as he is sitting on the bus reflecting, this is something he is leaving behind. This is his past, this is his back-story, and now he has begun his travel.

### 3.2.3 JOE IN NEW YORK

Joe's plan is to hustle *women*, and *women* are what he looks for when he arrives in New York. He approaches women on the street but is overlooked or turned down. A montage sequence shortly after Joe arrives in New York illustrates this. In the montage sequence he is walking around, watching people and approaching some of the ladies he sees, but they walk away.

#### 3.2.3.1 THE FIRST N.Y. WOMAN

After Joe has first arrived in New York to start his "career" as a hustler he is tragically unsuccessful in his attempts to earn money. The first woman he actually goes to bed with in New York treats him like a dog and ends up receiving money from *him*. The sequence with this woman starts out with the camera placed low and angled slightly downwards so at first we see her dog and her legs. Then we see Jack's boots as he is walking into the frame and we follow his steps past her until he stops and turns around. He walks back to the woman and the dog, and bends down to pet the dog. The whole of Jack is inside the frame now, but we still only see the woman from the waist down. He is at her feet, at level with a dog. Jack stands up, and the camera tilts to follow him as he rises up to face the woman. He asks her for directions to the Statue of Liberty, but she just impolitely turns him down and walks away. Still she stops, turns back and smiles at him. He takes this as an invitation and follows her in, smiling; the fringes on the back of his jacket wagging like a dog's tail. Inside the apartment she is talking on the phone, presumably with her husband, while Jack is licking her ear. His behaviour is still dog-like. She exclaims "Oh, God, stop! I die from that.", whereupon the person on the phone apparently asks her who she is talking to, because she adds: "No, I was just talking to Baby. I was talking to the *dog* Maury". She emphasises the word "dog". She continues to talk on the phone while undressing Joe. When she hangs up the phone they speed up the undressing, the dog yapping. She keeps calling Joe "Baby", the same way she addresses the dog. Joe agrees to this behaviour, but at this point he still expects that she will pay him in the end. She does not. He ends up giving *her* money after they had sex.

Joe's and the woman's expectations are not in agreement, and when they confront each other, he is the one who loses. When the woman starts crying he takes out his wallet. He cannot stand arguing with this crying woman. This trait of Joe might be kindness, but then it might just as well be naïveté. Either way he gives in and ends up the loosing part.

### 3.2.3.2 MEETING RATSO AND THE FAGGOTS OF N.Y.

Joe Buck is involved with several people in various emotional and physical ways, but one of his most prominent relationships during the film is decidedly with Rico "Ratso" Rizzo. Other relationships, like that with his grandmother, stretches over several years in *story time*, but his relationship with Ratso is the one that has the longest *plot time*. Joe meets Ratso early after arriving in New York, after his first, failed attempt to "hustle". They meet in a bar where they sit and talk. Joe trusts Ratso immediately, but being somewhat naïve he does not see that Ratso has an agenda: He wants Joe's money.

In this situation, and on a few occasions later, Joe meets Jackie, a young man who is overtly feminine in manners, clothing and appearance. He is depicted as a classic stereotypical "pansy". While Joe and Ratso sit talking by the counter in the bar, the man enters the frame wearing a green see-through shirt, sun glasses on the top of his head, eye-liner and lip gloss.

```
                        JACKIE
          Hi cowboy, got a cigarette?
                (Looking and sounding feminine)

                        JOE
          Hey, sweetheart.
                (smiling)

Joe offers him a cigarette but Ratso takes it.

                        RATSO
          More goddamn faggots in this town …

                        JACKIE
          Oh kiss it Ratso.

Jackie leaves them, irritated.

                        RATSO
                (to JACKIE)
          Up yours.
                (then, to JOE)
          You've gotta watch out for that.

                        JOE
          Hey, you really know the ropes. I wish I'd
          bumped into you before.
```

Later Jackie appears again. This time he enters the frame filing his finger nails (Figure 3, page 59). He is wearing several rings and a bracelet, he has tight, white trousers and a purse. He is

saucy and rude to them, and as he knows Ratso's name it is apparent that he knows Ratso from before. Ratso repeatedly calls out "faggot" to him when he leaves.

The film draws attention to Jackie through his striking appearance and mannerism compared to the other two, and as is visible in the above picture, through his centred position between the slightly out-of-focus protagonists. Also through dialogue, with Ratso's repeated use of the word "faggot", the viewer's attention is focused on this particular stereotypical representation. Jackie is depicted as mean, and as such the film establishes him as a negative image. Joe trusts Ratso, and Ratso does not seem to view "faggots" particularly favourably. This participates in distancing Joe from the concept of homosexuality that the film establishes. We must play by the film's rule, now it is laying out the rules of "screen homosexuality", and Joe is not like that. Jackie's function is to be a foil to Joe, and Ratso's comment (and frequent references to "faggots" during the movie in general) widens this gap between Joe and the "screen homosexuals" the film establishes. The film is persistently telling us Joe is not a "faggot".

When Ratso later has set Joe up and swindled him, Joe returns to the bar to look for Ratso. At this point Jackie just laughs vigorously, swings his yellow purse and leaves (Figure 4, page 59). Joe becomes angry. He picks up a bottle, whereupon we see images of young Joe smashing a mirror, over and over again, while his grandmother screams "Stop it! Stop it!" When we see present day Joe again he puts the bottle down. This shows an aggressive side of Joe. He is apparently desperate since Ratso disappeared with his money, and when Jackie starts laughing Joe becomes aggressive, a trait usually ascribed to *masculinity* (Lorentzen, 2004:114). His childhood memory shows an aggressive, uncontrolled young Joe, but when the flashback ends, Joe puts the bottle down. This action does not necessarily feminise Joe, but it gives evidence of inner struggle and character development. Maybe it is evidence of strength and control. Different readings become possible.

Jackie does not *do* anything at all to suggest his sexuality while we see him, but he is portrayed as very feminine, both in appearance and manners. This is how he chooses to appear; this is how he dresses and acts. Thus this can be said to be how Jackie expresses his sexual "identity", or how he is playing his *social sexual role*. The images of Jackie put our understanding of Joe in perspective and Jackie's character provides a basis for comparison: Joe is not like Jackie. Even though Joe might appear feminine in certain ways, he appears masculine compared with Jackie. Again, this is Jackie functioning as a foil to Joe. The fact that we know nothing about his sexual preferences comes in second. Through performance,

dialogue and the visual Jackie is *coded* feminine—a "film homosexual". Considering homosexuality and heterosexuality as a binary, Joe would by comparison *not* be homosexual.

**Figure 3** Joe and Ratso in foreground, interrupted by Jackie.

**Figure 4** Jackie, the "effeminate pansy".

#### 3.2.3.3 THE "NERD"

Joe's next "hustle encounter" is yet another disappointment. He waits outside a movie theatre along with other men when a young man approaches (Figure 5). They do not say anything, just look at each other and then slightly nod. They sit beside each other in the theatre while a science fiction film is running. The man puts his arm around Joe and looks at him. Joe keeps looking ahead, but glances at the man shortly. The man bends down towards Joe's crotch while the camera keeps its focus on Joe's face. He looks uncomfortable. This man is clearly not a sexual object of *desire* or *attraction* for Joe, but like the women, he is supposed to be a source of income. Joe looks dejected and is not enjoying the situation. His facial expressions, and him staring emptily in front himself tells us how uncomfortable he is. Joe keeps a moderated expression, but reveals the dislike. But even though he is uncomfortable in this situation, Joe goes through with it, probably because he expects it will pay.

**Figure 5** The "nerd" who performs fellatio on Joe.

As the scene progresses the cutting frequency increases. The scene turns into a montage in which we see various images of Annie and the boys. Obviously these are mental subjective images from Joe's position. The rapid cutting and the various images we see indicate that he is preoccupied with these thoughts, as well as with the movie that is running, while the man is performing fellatio on him. The whole situation is transformed into a rather disturbing montage: During the sequence the film cuts to showing images from the film running in the theatre. On the canvas we see a man working with repairs on a ship in outer space, an indication that this might be a science fiction film. Suddenly the man on the canvas floats away from the ship out into space. A voice from the science fiction film says: "Jack, Jack, I've lost you!" The music intensifies, and reaches a climax when the man loses his grip of the star ship. This happens the same moment as the man bends down towards Joe's crotch, which seems to be an indication that, just like in the science fiction movie, this is a point where something crucial happens. This is out of their control and it cannot be undone. The space man floats out into space, away from his fellow astronauts, like Joe is now "lost", drifting out into something unknown that he can never return from.

Similarly to this sequence, there are also other such meta elements throughout the movie. After the incident in the theatre, as Joe walks away from there, we see a huge signboard announcing that a theatre is showing "THE TWISTED SEX also 'SEX DIARY' JUSTINE". These titles might be a comment on what Joe has just done, being another example of the use of meta elements. They fit as part of the plot but they can be seen as comments on the story and the action. When cross-cutting between the action in the theatre and the science fiction movie, the story within the science fiction film enriches the situation going on in Joe's life. Applying such techniques *Midnight Cowboy* does not make an effort at concealing its artifice the way David Bordwell suggests Hollywood films do (Bordwell et al., [1985] 2004). The use of meta elements is not a particularly "invisible" form of storytelling, but rather points to the film as a medium and admits its own nature. Thus the application of meta elements breaks with the expectations to Hollywood's conventions of classic narrative film form.

After they have finished, Joe and the man are in the theatre bathroom where the man admits he does not have any money. Joe shakes him by his jacket and demands he empties his pockets. He does not have anything and Joe calms down. Again Joe takes control over his temper and settles the situation. Rather than being violent (also a masculine trait connected to aggression) Joe once again caves in on his demands and leaves empty-handed.

There are a few reasons why this incident could be said to not mean anything significant for Joe's sexuality, while simultaneously this is a quite explicit sexual act. First, there is the fact that Joe expects to get paid. For him this situation is meant to be work. He is in New York to be a hustler, though he might not initially have been prepared to include men in his "business". On the other hand he does not receive payment. He ends up having done this voluntarily and for free. What does that make Joe? But one must also take the gender and sexuality of the other party into account. He wears glasses and carries a folder and a book (Figure 5, page 59). This might indicate that he is a student and that this is just "youth experimentation". Or, this look could be said to be stereotypically "geeky" or "nerdy". This is supported by the genre of the movie they watch: science fiction. Science fiction "nerds" or "geeks" are often considered asexual and androgyne in gender expression, and the situation might be dismissed as something other than a same-sex sexual experience. But it is not that simple. This is a sexual encounter with another man, Joe does it voluntarily, and he even prefers to do this over cleaning dishes. Somewhat earlier he had seen a sign advertising "Dishwasher wanted", but he chose not to take the kind of work he used to have in Texas. He chose to rather do this.

#### 3.2.3.4 STAYING WITH RATSO, JOE DREAMS OF BEING RAPED

Joe is still angry that Ratso tricked him out of money and disappeared, and he is highly sceptical when they meet again. Still they manage to get along and Ratso invites Joe to stay with him in the condemned building where he has found dwelling. This is a major, friendly gesture of Ratso who usually seems to keep his own company. When they arrive at the building Ratso says that no one else knows about this entrance, revealing the importance of actually bringing Joe there and allowing him to share his home.

Shortly after they have arrived at Ratso's apartment Joe falls asleep. Again we see a montage of mental subjectivity. Since Joe is asleep, this sequence is most likely his dream. The sequence takes a nightmare-like shape with dark, grainy black and white images, we can hear the wind blowing and we can see the lightning flashing in the sky. Joe and Annie are in a car kissing. Suddenly the car is surrounded by people and several flashlights are directed at them. Annie screams, but there is no sound, just various psychedelic instruments and noises, and the sounds of wind. The two of them are pulled out of the car. Most of the men outside are

wearing cowboy hats. Both Annie and Joe are naked and look afraid. The camera is moving fast, the cutting is fast, and a lot of the images are close-ups, or even extreme close-ups[12] of Joe's eyes and nose, making the scenes rather disorienting. Annie runs away, naked, but men run after her. Joe is also naked. Men hold him as he struggles to get loose. The film cuts in an image of young Joe lying naked over his grandmother's lap. She is spanking him. The men position him bent over by the car, and they spread his legs. We now see another image of his grandmother. She has hung a hot-water bottle on the side of the bed, she has a long tube, and she is looking serious. This might be a device to perform an enema, be as we only get a short view of this without the apparatus being in use, this is mere speculation on my part. Back in the car situation we see men spreading Joe's legs. It seems like both Annie and Joe are being raped at this point. Several men with flashlights approach. They appear to be police, and Ratso is among them. He is smiling. There is some struggle as Joe is being held by the police. We see two police men taking Annie, wrapped in a blanket, away. She points at Joe as they take her away: "He's the one. He's the only one …" We see various images of a building collapsing, of Annie and Joe behind or outside fences, and at last Annie is taken away in a car.

Like the bus sequence, this sequence is difficult to understand fully, but I find it to be an interesting montage. With the various images from Joe's young adult life with Annie, and his childhood with his grandmother, with the various incidents combined in a montage, the images enrich each other. Combined they offer new meanings that they would not necessarily have had alone. Soviet cinema experimented with such techniques already in 1917 and created the school of the Soviet Montage. Such stylistic exploration developed further during the 1920s (Bordwell and Thompson, 1994:134-136), and there are rich and various traditions of combining images and creating meaning through cutting. Trying to establish precisely what these images actually represent will be interpretation, but that is precisely why it is important to consider the various possibilities and not just try to find *one* solution.

The sequence shows Joe being pulled away from the girl he is with, and then both Joe and Annie are raped by men. One question that arises is if this is something that has actually happened to him or not. The sequence *does* contain people that we have already established are figures from his past, but that does not necessarily make this a memory. As this is a dream

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[12] For an overview of how I apply terms to describe shot types, visit mediacollege.com (Shot Types, *MediaCollege.com*).

it does not have to reflect what has happened to him, but of course, it might. It is unclear whether this is something he has experienced, if this is something he fears, or even if this is a scenario he is curious about. The nightmare quality of this sequence, the stern look on his grandmother's face, his struggling to get free, all indicate that this is something he is not comfortable with—or at least this does not seem to be something he desires. Dreams are difficult to interpret, and this particular property of the sequence is one of the things I find most fascinating: The ambiguity. This makes Joe's identity and his sexuality a question of interpretation. This collage is by all probability his mental images, his dream, but even though we get this glimpse into the Joe's mind they only make him seem more complex, and we might even have to adjust our perception of Joe, and our expectations to him.

#### 3.2.3.5 "YOU DON'T LOOK LIKE NO FAG"

When Joe wakes up after the nightmare he is suspicious of Ratso's motives and intentions: "You want me to stay here. You're after something. What are you after?" This is shortly after Joe's encounter with the man in the theatre, and this experience seems to have changed Joe's own expectations to people. But Joe admits: "You don't look like no fag". His newly shaped expectations and Ratso's appearance do not match, and now Joe is puzzled as to why he has been brought there. By uttering this Joe shows that he has attempted to interpret Ratso's sexuality. He reveals that he expects a connection between certain appearances or behaviours and sexuality, and based on Ratso's mannerisms or looks Joe deduces that Ratso is no "fag". To Joe, as it is for me in this thesis, sexuality is a matter of interpretation, and he is trying to read Ratso and decode his sexuality. But by saying that he does not *look* like a "fag" Joe supports the stereotypical view that classical Hollywood film seems to have had to "screen homosexuals": They somehow *look* like homosexuals.

Joe is evidently worried but he tries not to show fear. He rather replies sarcastically and becomes hostile in an attempt to appear intimidating. Maybe he does not want to be associated with what happened in the theatre, and he resorts to the behaviour he associates with masculine heterosexuality: Aggression and hostility towards male kindness and intimacy.

JOE

I hope you know what you're in for. I'm a truly dangerous person. I am. If someone does me bad, like you, I swear … If I'd caught up with you that night there would be one dead Ratso long by now. You understand me?

Ratso just looks at him.

JOE

You hear?

RATSO

I'm impressed. You're a killer.

Joe sighs and looks down.

JOE

So I'm gonna stay here a couple of days. I just thought you should know. That's all.

Joe takes off his boots again.

This is yet another scene showing the aggressive Joe giving in and calming down, but this time he is *trying* to seem intimidating, he is not getting worked up like he was before. Joe does not seem comfortable in this role though. He does not even seem to be completely convinced himself when he utters that he is a "truly dangerous person".

#### 3.2.3.6 "JOHN WAYNE! YOU'RE GONNA TELL ME HE'S A FAG?!"

Sexual/gendered appearance and identity become an issue for Joe and Ratso, and through dialogue in the shape of an argument they reveal how sexual identity to them is a matter of interpretation based on clothing as signifiers. Their argument starts with Ratso being miserable in New York, dreaming of going to Florida, and he starts talking about how they should leave because it would be easier for Joe to "score" with women in Florida. As Ratso puts it, "In New York, no rich lady with any class at all buys that cowboy crap anymore. They're laughing at you on the street." They start quarrelling, and Ratso attacks Joe verbally: "Frankly, you're beginning to smell. And for a stud in New York, that's a handicap." Joe strikes back: "I bet you ain't never even been laid!" Joe says this to Ratso as if this is something of matter, something that makes a man, and something that will hurt him. Ratso hardly reacts, so it is difficult to suggest how he feels. Ratso tells Joe: [T]hat great big dumb cowboy crap of yours don't appeal to nobody. Except every Jackie on 42nd street. That's faggot stuff. You wanna call it by its name, that's strictly for fags." In saying this he admits that sexuality (and gender) is a matter of *performance*, and that it is supposed to be interpreted. The film has had a focus on visual expression of sexual "identity", and has portrayed exaggerated stereotypical "fags" (or "pansies", like Benshoff and Griffin chooses to call them (Benshoff and Griffin, 2006), and "sissies" as is the term Russo uses (Russo, [1981]

1987)). I see this as deliberate play with expressions of social sexual identity, and Ratso's outburst is yet another one of the film's ways to criticise the concept of *looking* like a certain sexuality, like is the traditional way of representing homosexuality in Hollywood films.

Joe defends himself referring to John Wayne, but he looks hurt: "John Wayne! You're gonna tell me he's a fag?!" Joe apparently wants to be like John Wayne, the personification of the western genre, the ultimate image of masculinity. The fact that Joe himself brings up John Wayne in this argument proves his fascination with this icon, and his need to be like him. If the viewer did not make the connection before, it is brought up explicitly through dialogue and made obvious. On this particular point the movie follows the Hollywood recipe, making Joe's cowboy theme and his performance perfectly obvious (Bordwell et al., [1985] 2004).

Joe seems to care less about whether other men are masculine or feminine as long as he is John Wayne, a stud, and now Ratso attacks this part of him. Joe has constructed a gendered self that he believes resembles his masculine idols. He needs to be perceived a particular way by other people and he polishes himself to appear this way. Joe's sexual and a gendered "identity" is important to him, as is made visible by the frequent admiring in mirrors. But it is precisely in his need to be like John Wayne and in his perception of this icon where Joe and people of New York misunderstand each other. For him this is masculinity, but in New York the cowboy (hat) has become a bankrupt signifier emptied of its connotations of John Wayne. The cowboy hat is seen frequently during the film, even on fashionable women in NY (Lang, 2002:147), to the point that it becomes a motif. New York has moved on since the golden age of the western, times have changed, the western genre has evolved (Schatz, 1981), and what for Joe expresses masculinity and virility is now an expression rewritten, and maybe even perceived as a parody. The macho style was being picked up by the gay community (Lang, 2002; Piontek, 2006), and the iconography of the western adopted as a new homosexual stereotype. Joe has missed out on this, making him misinterpreted and misunderstood.

Robert Lang states that appearances are indexes of identity. They are important in any society, especially in modern societies, but they are not the same everywhere or at different times. Joe and Ratso do not have the same background and do not interpret Joe's expression the same way. This is a result of allowing visual signifiers to becoming defining in how we decode people's sexuality. New York City and Joe's small Texan town obviously do not speak the same "languages" of clothing (Lang, 2002:146). Similar to works of art I would argue that there is a meaning-making process in the expressing and interpreting of sexuality, and other

people become the active *readers* of sexuality. This shows how cultural differences and background shape our understanding of gender and sexuality. Misunderstandings occur when people enter a culture where they are not familiar with the codes of gender and sexuality—when they do not speak the same language of clothing.

#### 3.2.3.7 THE PARTY, AND SHIRLEY

Joe has apparently grown to care deeply for Ratso, and on some level he might love him. Still, during the plot their relationship seems to be exclusively platonic in nature. They do have a physical closeness, but they do not have sex as far as we know. Their physical closeness is made visible through different situations, such as when Ratso cuts Joe's hair or polishes his boots. These are practical, "ordinary" tasks, but the film takes the time to present a number of these situations. Such dwelling on the ordinariness of everyday events is a style of film making in particular connected to the Italian neorealism since the 1940s. The neorealist aesthetic insisted on the beauty of the ordinary and the repetitive. This style has made a great impact on other traditions, and of recent this is familiar from certain independent traditions, but as classic Hollywood film is usually considered more action driven (Bordwell and Thompson, 1994:415-418), this is a rather untraditional, or unexpected move. But the effect of this move is that we see how the two characters live together and how they show affection and caring through these "minor" gestures. Another example of how Joe is shown to care for Ratso is when they go to a party and Joe uses a corner of his shirt to wipe off grease, sweat and dirt from Ratso's face and hair. In doing this he shows how he must care for this man, because Ratso looks awfully filthy and dirty at this point, and his health is getting worse.

The party they attend is rather "Warholesque" (reminiscent of the expression of Andy Warhol), and the film applies various techniques, as I exemplify shortly, to create a rather strange atmosphere. This reference to Warhol is a particular intertextual and cultural reference that potentially influence how Joe, the movie itself, and this particular party is perceived. Viewing the party sequence and the film in the light of Warhol's work, my impression of Joe as a tragic-parodical character becomes amplified. I see the film as a critical comment on the concept of sexual identity and on the western genre. *Midnight Cowboy* criticises gender and sexual identity self-reflexively rather than taking them for granted.

At the party Joe and Ratso are the odd men out, but Joe is enjoying himself, having been handed a joint and a couple of pills. The movie uses psychedelic sounds and music, and it

shows glimpses of a canvas in the background where a film is being screened. The canvas shows a woman playing with a cowboy boot and feathers. Also *Midnight Cowboy* cuts in documentary-like images of people at the party being interviewed. Some of the interviewees talk incoherently, repeating themselves. In this case I would argue that the dwelling on certain objects, and the repetitiveness and the incoherence of dialogue can be connected to the avant-garde traditions of Warhol and his aesthetic of boredom and repetition. There is also a "camp" sensibility at this party, in tradition of Warhol and certain gay sub-cultures, celebrating and elevating the exaggerated, the excessive, and the extravagant (Ibid., 595).

Joe looks confused and amused, people are dancing and acting strangely, we see close-ups of smoking incense, and superimposed colourful shapes on images of people. Joe is laughing. All of this creates a peculiar impression and it creates an alienation of Ratso to the people at the party. It also lets the viewer in on Joe's experience with the drugs, and I am inclined to relate this to *perceptual subjectivity* even though the shots are not presented from Joe's point of view (Bordwell and Thompson, 2008). This looks like the kind of party where anything can happen, and it is difficult to even suggest what expectations one might have to a place like this. This is Joe down the rabbit hole in a Warhol Wonderland.

At the party Joe meets Shirley, who probably finds his naïve childishness charming and maybe even rare. They start kissing but Ratso takes the role of Joe's manager and arranges a deal. She seems to find Ratso amusing, but goes along with this and brings Joe home.

INT. SHIRLEY'S BEDROOM

Shirley and Joe lie in bed. She is smoking, he is looking bewildered.

SHIRLEY
Well, it happens. Don't worry about it.

JOE
Well it never happened to me before!

He has apparently had trouble getting an erection. Since they cannot have sex and he does not want to sleep they decide to play word game. He spells out words with the dice: "MAN", and then "MONY". When he struggles to find a word that starts with "Y" she tries to help him:

SHIRLEY
*Gay* ends in Y. Hmm? You like that?

JOE

Cut that out.

SHIRLEY

Gay, fey… Is that your problem, baby?

Joe looks angry, throws her on the bed, gets on top of her.

JOE

I'm gonna show you what problem…

He kisses her. They stop and look at each other, both smiling. Then she takes hold of his finger and bends it back. He looks hurt. This becomes a sort of struggle. She tries to push him on his back while he tries to keep his control. She gets him on his back and bites him but he rolls back, reclaiming his top position. This sequence uses close-ups and close medium shots and consists of many short shots: His back, the dice sticking to his back, the fur of her jacket, her breast, his bottom, her hands pulling his hair, her hands clawing his back, her clenching her teeth, and her pulling his skin. We frequently see close-ups of their faces. He seems both carried away and uncomfortable, and she has looks of wildness and ecstasy.

Within this sequence appears even more complicated sexually. This time he has sex with a woman, and he *does* receive money after having performed. Again one could ask if this counts as a part of his sexuality when done with the intention of earning money, but it is not that simple, as we see from Joe's performance. Though this is meant as a job he cannot turn his sexuality on and off just as he pleases. His failing erection is a proof of that, and it puzzles him because he has never experienced this before. When she confronts him and asks if he might be gay he gets excited and is suddenly able to perform. His re-lighted fire adds layers to Joe's sexuality. It becomes increasingly difficult to place him in any "category".

### 3.2.4 CARING ENOUGH TO BEAT UP TOWNY, AND GO TO FLORIDA

At home in the apartment Ratso's health is worse. He cannot walk anymore, and he is terrified of doctors, police and hospitals. All he wants is to go to Florida. When Joe comes home he has bought socks and medicines for Ratso for the money Shirley paid him. Joe is again acting caring and loving towards his friend. Joe helps Ratso to bed and is very concerned as his illness is getting worse. Joe argues that he cannot leave for Florida now that things are starting to look good. He has earned money and he even has another appointment. Ratso can only focus on Florida, though. Through he's next actions Joe shows just how much Ratso must mean to him: Joe is picked up by Towny, an older man. They walk in a rapid tempo while the

man keeps talking. He suggests they have dinner. While the man talks Joe seems nervous, looking around. Towny says he is expecting a telephone call at the hotel, and brings Joe to his room. It is his mother calling. While the man talks on the phone Joe practises being aggressive, clenching his fist in front of the mirror, saying phrases to himself like "I've got a sick boy on my hands". When the man hangs up the phone Joe asks why he has brought him there. At this point the man is sitting and Joe is standing in front of him, Joe's crotch just in front of the man's face. He is briefly, almost reluctantly looking at Joe's crotch (Figure 6).

**Figure 6** Towny, levelled at Joe's crotch, miserable and loathing life.

During this following sequence the film cuts in images of Joe and Ratso leaving the apartment and getting on a bus. I have left these out in the subsequent account of the sequence.

INT. TOWNY'S HOTEL ROOM

TOWNY

Joe, it's so difficult, I… You're a nice person, Joe. I should have never asked you up here. You're a lovely person, really.
(Towny looks up at Joe.)
Oh God, I loathe life. I loathe it. Please go, please.

JOE

You want me to leave?

TOWNY

No …
(shaking his head, his eyes closed)
I mean, yes, yes. Please go. Come back tomorrow? Promise?

JOE

I'm going to Florida tomorrow.

TOWNY

(almost whispering)

> This is terrible. You meet someone, you think … yeah …

Towny could be seen as another gay stereotype: The self-loathing, miserable man, still in the closet, repulsed by his own sexuality. Towny admits to loathing life and he seems torn up about the way he feels about Joe. He cannot come to terms with himself and he seems to suffer. When Joe asks for money Towny gladly gives it to him, but then Joe says he needs more and becomes violent. He beats the old man out of the way to try and get to his wallet. The man repeats "no" and utters phrases like: "Oh, I deserved that" and "I brought this on myself, I know I did." He is bleeding. The camera dwells on his mother's picture on the nightstand. This as another trait that commonly is ascribed to homosexual portrayals: The closeness with mother. His mother calls him and he travels with a framed picture of her. Such stereotypes are often portrayed as blaming their miserable life on their (relationship with their) mother. In the case of Towny this is done in such a way, with such emphasis on their phone communication and the picture, that I consider this intended ironically[13].

Joe is set on taking the man's money, and he hits Towny with his fist so he falls bleeding down on the bed and loses his denture. When Joe takes his money and is about to leave the room the man on the bed mutters: "Oh, Joe, Joe… Thank you, thank you…" He seems to hate the way he is, and he even thanks Joe while Joe is beating him up. Even though Joe does not admit a homosexual identity, he is still completely different from the denying Towny. Towny seems well aware, and even focused, on his homosexuality, but he tries to deny it. Joe on the other hand does not claim a homosexual identity, but neither a heterosexual one.

Through beating up Towny and stealing his money, the usually controlled Joe shows through performance how much he cares for Ratso. Joe even said he did not care to go to Florida right now, but for Ratso he does. Now that Joe has found the financial means to make it possible, they leave with the bus. During their trip south we see how Ratso's body is giving in: He cannot control his bladder and urinates in the bus seat. He is crying, and Joe takes care of the mess and buys new clothes for the both of them. Joe throws the cowboy boots, the leather jacket and the hat in a garbage bin. The symbolism in this gesture is monumental and signifies

[13] Another example of an ironic attitude to the mother's part from the same time period as *Midnight Cowboy* is found in the play *The Boys in the Band*, in which one of the characters emphasises his relationship with his mother, whereupon another comments: "Christ, how sick analysts must get of hearing how mummy and daddy made their darlin' into a fairy" (Crowley, [1968] 2003:11).

the end of this misstep. Joe literally throws his cowboy apparel in the bin, and with it he throws the whole concept of John Wayne and a masculinity that never seemed to fit him. Joe undresses the cowboy persona and buys a new one, a new set of clothes. In Robert Lang's analysis of the film[14] he emphasises the dialogue between Joe and Ratso on the bus on the way to Florida where they comment on the comfort and the cheap price of the new clothes. Lang also sees the clothing as a metaphor of masculinity, and on his way to Florida Joe has found a masculinity that he finds comfortable and affordable (Lang, 2002:149).

Towards the end of the film Joe keeps talking while they sit on the bus. We only see Joe within the frame: "When we get to Miami, what I'm gonna do is get some sort of job, you know. 'Cause, hell, I ain't no kind of hustler. I mean, there must an easier way to make a living than that. Some sort of outdoors work. What do you think?" Joe has changed not only his clothes, but his attitude. The camera zooms out until we see Rico sitting completely still with his head bent and eyes open. He is dead. By first capturing Joe and his monologue about their Florida life and then zooming out to reveal that Ratso is dead, the viewer first takes part in Joe's excitement, and the subsequent chock in realising Ratso is dead. A look of disappointment runs across Joe's face. He alerts the bus driver, but they have to drive on, so Joe closes his friend's eyes and holds him. People on the bus stare at them. They drive past palm trees and buildings, and Joe looks out at them while he has his arms around Ratso. They have reached their destination, Joe has changed, but Ratso never made it the whole way.

### 3.3 *BROKEBACK MOUNTAIN*: ENNIS DEL MAR AND JACK TWIST

In Wyoming in 1963 Ennis Del Mar seeks a job as a shepherd for the summer. Jack Twist turns up on the same errand. They do not know each other and do not speak at all while they wait for the man in charge. When he arrives they are assigned their tasks: Ennis becomes the camp tender and Jack the herder. They do not utter a word while in his office.

On Brokeback Mountain they build a camp and start their tasks. During the summer they grow tired of the initial arrangement and Ennis becomes the herder while Jack tends to the

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[14] Lang underlines the significance of the soundtrack and the song "Going where the weather suits my clothes". I have chosen not to emphasise the soundtrack in relation to Joe myself, so for a further analysis of this and other elements I have chosen to steer clear of, I recommend Lang's book, *Masculine Interests*, and in particular the chapter entitled "*Midnight Cowboy's* Backstory" (Lang, 2002).

camp. One night, after talking and drinking until late, Ennis is too tired to go up to the sheep. That night the men share the tent and end up having sex. The next day they deny being "queer", but later they seek together in the tent again. From this point the two men continue to have a sexual relationship. Earlier than expected they are instructed to leave the mountain. As they are about to leave they get into a fight, and before they part they exchange just a few words. When Jack drives off Ennis falls apart emotionally.

Time passes. The next summer Jack returns to Brokeback to seek a job and to look for Ennis, but the manager does not want him there after what he saw them do the previous summer. Ennis has married Alma, they have two children, and though Alma and Ennis are young they seem tired. When they have sex he turns off the light and takes her from behind while they are both wearing their night clothes. Their marriage is slowly failing. Jack also meets a girl, Lureen, with whom he gets married and has a child.

In 1967 Ennis receives a postcard from Jack saying he will come by. They are both excited and when they meet they kiss passionately. Alma catches a glimpse of this but does not say anything. The men spend the night in a motel but leave for the mountains the next day. Jack suggests they move together, but Ennis refuses and tells a story from his childhood about two ranchers living together, one of them getting killed because of their situation. Ennis and Jack continue to meet on "fishing trips" every once in a while. Time goes by, and though Jack's marriage to Lureen is not a happy one, they seem to get along. Alma and Ennis quarrel increasingly, resulting in a divorce. Jack receives a postcard from Ennis telling him about the divorce, but misinterprets this as an invitation. He drives to see Ennis, who does not have time for him, so he has to drive off again. He goes to Mexico where he picks up a male prostitute.

Even though Alma and Ennis' marriage is over he remains a part of their daughters' lives. Ennis enters a relationship with another girl, Cassie, but he keeps meeting Jack. Jack persists in suggesting he and Ennis move together, and obviously he wants more of their relationship, but Ennis becomes angry in response. Ultimately Ennis' relationship with Cassie ends.

One day Ennis learns that Jack has died. Ennis contacts Lureen, and though she says he was killed accidentally, Ennis fears that Jack was killed because of the way he lived. Ennis visits Jack's parents and finds that Jack had kept a shirt that Ennis believed himself to have forgotten on Brokeback the first summer. Jack has kept the bloodstained shirt all these years,

on a hanger inside his own shirt. Ennis brings the shirts home and keeps them in his closet beside a postcard of Brokeback Mountain.

### 3.3.1 THE FIRST ENCOUNTER

*Brokeback Mountain* starts when the two protagonists, Ennis Del Mar and Jack Twist, first meet. Ennis arrives at Joe Aguirre's trailer in search for work a short while before Jack does, and just stands and waits, smoking, until Jack arrives. The only superimposed text during the beginning of the movie is the presentations of the production companies, the film's name, and information about the time and place: "1963 Signal, Wyoming". There is no (pre-)credits sequence. As we are introduced to the characters at the very first time they meet, we do not have any advantages on any of the characters. We do not know anything about their past or about their personalities beyond what they themselves are able to infer.

During this introductory sequence Jack comes across as more emotional and active than Ennis. Ennis arrives by getting a lift, while Jack drives his car. Jack's car does not behave as Jack wants, and when Jack has climbed out of his car he kicks it. Ennis just stands there and watches. Jack starts approaching Ennis, but Ennis just looks down, shifts his weight, and kicks the dirt. Ennis keeps his hands in his pockets, and his hat completely covers his face when he bends his head. Just by standing like this he comes across as reserved, and hands in pockets he looks retained. Jack stops when he sees that Ennis does not seem interested, and he turns back to his car. Ennis sits on the steps outside the trailer, waiting, and Jack uses the time to shave. Just by these few introductory actions, or lack thereof, the characters are introduced.

Other elements also play a part in shaping our understanding of Ennis and Jack during this first sequence. In this movie, similarly to *Midnight Cowboy*, the clothing of the protagonists resembles that of the classic cowboy. They both have the hat, boots and shirt. Again, this is western genre iconography, and masculine coding. The music also points us in the direction of the western, in this sequence and during the movie in general. The pedal steel guitar colouring the soundtrack of *Brokeback Mountain* is the instrument that makes the characteristic sound of much country and western music. This sets the mood, and in establishing the characters, the viewer expectations are taking shape.

During this first sequence the two characters hardly look at each other, they do not utter a word, but they exchange a few looks. Even though Ennis makes himself inapproachable and

ignores Jack, Jack sneaks a glance at Ennis from time to time. Jack is for instance looking at Ennis in the mirror while he shaves (Figure 7 & Figure 8). He does not express much emotion, but his act of looking suggests he is curious about Ennis, or interested even. Through showing a perceptual subjective image from Jack's point of view we see that he has framed Ennis within the mirror. Already the film introduces mirroring, literally. Much like in *Midnight Cowboy* the mirroring becomes a motif in the movie. As I will get back to, scenes are mirroring each other both visually and auditory, and Jack and Ennis are mirroring behaviour, reflecting each other. In this particular case the mirror provides Jack with the possibility to look at Ennis unnoticed.

**Figure 7** Point-of-view shot. Ennis on the stairs, Jack watching him in the mirror.

**Figure 8** Jack looking at Ennis in the mirror while shaving.

### 3.3.2 THE SUMMER ON BROKEBACK MOUNTAIN

As the two men spend the summer herding sheep they grow close. We can see this in their behaviour, in their conversations, and it is even expressed through image composition. The film has a slow pace, uses wide shots of nature, and offers situations of everyday life, like Jack doing laundry, or peeling potatoes while Ennis is cleaning up in the background. This leads me to comparing the movie to *Midnight Cowboy* and the point I made about its resemblance (in this particular matter) to Italian neorealism. The viewer is allowed into their private space, their everyday life, creating closeness to the characters through recognition of the ordinary. These are not your fantastic heroes; they are real people who peel their potatoes.

#### 3.3.2.1 DISTANCED CLOSENESS

Shortly after Ennis and Jack have settled on Brokeback Mountain, a few scenes take place that I consider important for illustrating the distanced closeness of their situation. In these scenes the image composition is strikingly similar, mirroring each other. They are separate,

looking at each other, but they are too far apart to see each other. The two scenes take place some time apart, and the scene where Jack is looking at Ennis' camp is set at night time (Figure 9 & Figure 10), and when Ennis is looking up towards Jack it is day time (Figure 11 & Figure 12). Both the scenes include a close-up or a medium close-up of the looking subject, whereupon the film cuts to an extreme wide shot representing perceptual subjectivity, where the person being watched is not even visible. These scenes make the separation between Ennis and Jack very clear by the camera keeping closeness to the one watching, and keeping its distance to the one being watched.

**Figure 9** Close-up of Jack looking towards Ennis' camp.

**Figure 10** (Point-of-view) Extreme wide shot of Ennis' camp.

**Figure 11** Medium close-up of Ennis looking towards Jack on the mountain.

**Figure 12** (Point-of-view) Extreme wide shot of Jack on the mountain.

#### 3.3.2.2 "NO MORE BEANS"

I wish to bring up a few pieces of dialogue that subtly shows a development in Ennis' character over time. It is unclear how long this time period is, but since they are fetching supplies each week, my guess is that this is played out over a few weeks.

The following excerpt takes place before they leave for the mountain:

THE SUPPLY MAN

Only thing, do never order soup. Them soup boxes are hard to pack.

ENNIS

Well I don't eat soup

Later, on the mountain, Jack is ready to ride off to the sheep. Ennis is tidying up after a meal:

JACK

No more beans.

Ennis does not respond or even look up.

At a later occasion Ennis is fetching supplies and ordering what they want for next week:

ENNIS

Here's next week's.

THE SUPPLY MAN

Thought you didn't eat soup.

ENNIS

Yea, well I'm sick of beans.

THE SUPPLY MAN

Too early in the summer to be sick of beans.

The following piece of dialogue takes place after Ennis, his horse and mule have encountered a bear and the animals were spooked. He lost a lot of the supplies and when he comes back to the camp late at night, Jack suggests they shoot one of the sheep.

EXT. CAMP. NIGHT.

ENNIS

What if Aguirre finds out, huh? We're supposed to guard the sheep, not eat them.

JACK

What's the matter with you, there's thousands of them.

ENNIS

I'll stick with beans.

JACK

Well I won't.

EXT. FOREST. DAY.

Ennis shoots an elk. Jack is shouting for joy.

ENNIS

I was getting tired of your dumb ass missing.

Ennis pushes Jack playfully.

As these scenes show, Ennis starts out claiming he does not eat soup. Despite this, he listens to Jack when the latter is "sick of beans". When Ennis looses the soup, he is happy to settle for beans, but as Jack refuses to do that, Ennis takes action and shoots an elk. During these scenes we see how Ennis tends to Jack's needs, putting his own opinions second. This happens over time, and rather subtly, but it shows how he must already care for Jack.

#### 3.3.2.3 THEY HAVE SEX

I would argue that when Ennis and Jack have sex, based on how the plot has established the characters until this point, the behaviour is supposed to come as a surprise to the viewer. In the beginning they do not talk and do not even seem to like each other—or at least Ennis seems ignorant to Jack, and Jack is just barely attempting contact. I have argued that there has been certain closeness between the men prior to this act, but the movie does not express any explicit or obvious cinematic stereotypical signs that they might indeed be "homosexual". Rather I would say the film does the opposite, they are both coded as masculine and heterosexual. The characters possess classic western genre masculinity, which is usually a heterosexual masculinity in Hollywood films. Especially this is the case of Ennis. He does not say much, and he does not express much emotion. This taciturnity and stoicism are traits that make Ennis classically masculine. Relying on cultural traditions, the traditions of Hollywood films, and their consistency in upholding heteronormativity, the film leads the viewer to expect heterosexuality. When the film shows Ennis and Jack having sex, it breaks with the expectations it has created. The sex becomes a surprise[15], even to the characters.

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[15] *Brokeback Mountain* was heavily promoted and discussed prior to its release and most people knew of the sex before they saw it. The movie lost its element of surprise with a real audience, but in this thesis I assume a position that does not take "spoiling" or promotional strategies into account.

During the scene in which they have sex Ennis and Jack never kiss or caress each other. They just "wrestle into having sex": One cold night Ennis is too tired, and too drunk it seems, to head up to the sheep for the night. Since it is awfully cold Jack invites him to sleep in the tent with him. They are both wearing their outer wear. During the night Jack puts Ennis' arm around himself. Ennis wakes up with a jerk and sits up. They look at each other for a little while and then Jack takes his jacket off. Ennis mutters: "What are you doing?" Jack tries to kiss Ennis, but Ennis keeps him away. Even though Ennis tries to fight Jack off, he still allows for closeness. Jack opens his belt, turns around, and bends over. Ennis opens his own trousers, pulls down Jack's, and penetrates Jack. They pant, moan and groan, and the scene both looks and sounds like they are fighting rather than having sex. It is dark in the tent and they have their clothes on, so there is not much eroticism. There is little cutting during this scene, and the whole scene where they actually have sex is composed of only two shots, keeping the scene simple, and proving that our perception of time has not been meddled with.

After having seen them have sex our understanding of their sexuality will probably change. Whatever we believed before, these actions speak clearly in terms of sexuality. Sexual behaviour, the *act* of having sex, has traditionally been viewed as most determining in shaping sexuality. The act of having sexual intercourse with someone of one's "own" sex was the "symptom" of homosexuality, and now Ennis and Jack have had sex. Sexual behaviour can also take into account *how* the sex is performed, and in this scene Jack is the initiating part, but Ennis becomes the active part. Based on Thomas Piontek's writings on sexuality, Jack's position in this scene could be described as "topping from below" (Piontek, 2006:85).

The morning after they had sex Ennis rides off to the sheep. The camera follows him far away and shows a very wide shot. He is riding up a hill, the camera placed much lower than Ennis so the framing captures a lot of the sky above him. We see how the sky and the clouds change behind him from blue sky and white clouds to a completely grey sky. When he moves into the dark sky the image is accompanied by the sounds of thunder. Such a composition lends itself to being interpreted as reflecting Ennis' thoughts and mood. The weather becomes a part of the mise-en-scene, part of the setting, and it contributes in creating a certain atmosphere, or in reflecting the inner life of the character (Bordwell and Thompson, [1979] 1997).

In *Brokeback Mountain* the sequences situated out in nature are in general characterised by extreme or very wide shots of vast landscapes. This is aesthetically pleasing, and the film was

nominated to an Academy Award for best cinematography, though it did not win. The traditions of widescreen (aesthetic) reach back to the 1950s. Ever since television entered the scene as a competitor film has struggled to keep its viewers by emphasising its distinctive character. Since the 1950s various technologies have been developed in order to make film a spectacular experience, and colour films increased radically in numbers during the early 1950s[16]. Different widescreen techniques were (re)introduced to out-challenge the small television screen, and they have been developed further over the years (Bordwell and Thompson, 1994:376-379). Cinematic technology of today allow for quite impressive representation of majestic scenery, like that of Brokeback Mountain.

Such cinematography emphasises the protagonists' place in nature, but simultaneously it distances the viewer from the characters and their emotions. In scenes which are particularly emotional for Ennis, the camera pulls away and shows a very wide, or an extreme wide shot. At this distance it is impossible to make out his feelings. Detachment from Ennis through cinematography makes him seem emotionless, as is also the case in the next scene I discuss.

#### 3.3.2.4 "YOU KNOW I AIN'T QUEER"

An evening (probably the evening after they have had sex) Ennis approaches Jack. Jack is lying on the grass and Ennis sits down beside him. The camera is behind Ennis:

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An over-the-shoulder shot. Past Ennis we see mountains and nature (Figure
13, page 80).

                        ENNIS
          It was a one-shot thing we got going on
          there.

A close-up of Jack lying on the grass (Figure 14, page 80).

                        JACK
          It's nobody's business but ours.

Over Ennis' shoulder again (same framing as before).

                        ENNIS
          You know I ain't queer.
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[16] Today black and white imagery is rarely used at all in mainstream film. Indeed there *is* black and white imagery in *Midnight Cowboy*, but this is on the side of my study.

Jack on the grass (same framing as before).

JACK

Me neither.

A wide shot of the two of them on the grass, camera behind them.

**Figure 13** Ennis talking to ... Jack.

**Figure 14** Jack talking to Ennis.

The image of Ennis talking is composed as an over-the-shoulder shot (Figure 13), but with one twist—or rather *without* Twist: Ennis is not looking at Jack while talking. We only see nature past his shoulder. This variation of the shot done in this dialogue scene makes Ennis' feelings inaccessible to the camera. We just barely see his face, unable to detect if he is showing any emotions. We can only guess that he is not, and this angle makes him seem more emotionless. It creates a distance between Ennis and the viewer. This is becoming a motif when it comes to Ennis. As viewers we do not have access to his facial expressions and his emotions.

Obviously the picture composition is not the only significant in mediating characters in this scene. The *dialogue* of this scene is crucial to understand how they, or at least how Ennis, see themselves/himself. They are communicating verbally that they are *not* queer, despite the actions that they have recently performed. They apparently view *queer* as something specific that they do not identify with. The widespread understanding of the concept of sexuality has shifted to being more defined by self-identification and own perception of self during the recent years. Their own understanding of self is therefore crucial in "defining their sexuality". But if one regards "queer" as the "identity" of someone who have sex with someone of the same sex, they are claiming an "identity" that excludes the kind of action they have performed. In such a case their actions and their verbal communication are not in agreement.

In the very scene after Ennis proclaims he is not queer the two men seek to each other in the tent again. Ennis is first sitting outside by the fire and we can make out Jack moving in the tent. Ennis enters the tent without saying anything. It seems he wants to be close to Jack, but he is reluctant to initiate any action. Even though Ennis is the one going up to Jack and thereby taking a first step, Jack is the one who reaches out his hand and touches his face and ultimately kisses him. Again they are taking roles, and they are both active/initiating and passive. Ennis does not return Jack's kiss at first, but he does not back away either. They perform a play of active/passive. They lay down, Jack rolls on top of Ennis and they kiss more passionately. The scene ends and thus the rest of their actions are up to the viewer to imagine.

During the scene the tent is dark but the light from the fire provides a warm glow. They act much tenderer this time. They touch, hold, kiss, and keep a slower pace. Jack is undressed, as far as we can see, and Ennis takes his jacket off. The scene is similar to the previous sex scene in providing long shots and little cutting. From the time the camera is placed inside the tent when Ennis approaches Jack, I count a total of eight shots within this scene.

I wish to draw attention to the camp fire in the background while they kiss and hold each other in the beginning of this scene. The fire burns beautifully symbolical between them. The image composition literally shows a fire between them as their passion is awakening and they are about to give in to their emotions. The imagery offers additional meaning to those familiar with the culturally established symbolism of fire, and expressions like "flaming" passion.

With the newfound tenderness and obvious emotions within this scene, the disagreement between their claimed sexual identity and their sexual emotions and behaviour becomes profound. Cutting from the scene where they deny being "queer" directly to the scene where they have sex applies a form of irony to their actions. They claim they *are* not what they *do*, which *is* indeed a queer attitude, in queer theoretical traditions. In saying they "ain't queer"; they are precisely that. I am aware I am arguing across time and across terms now. By all probability Ennis uses the word queer as a synonym for homosexual, while my use of the word in this case is derived from queer theory. In general I am reluctant to labelling someone with terms developed after their time, but I am tempted to call Ennis' actions queer. For the moment I will stop short on this subject, but I will get back to this in the next chapter.

#### 3.3.2.5 LEAVING BROKEBACK

Time comes for Ennis and Jack to leave the mountain. Jack starts throwing a lasso at Ennis, causing him to fall. We do not see Ennis' face. Ennis drags Jack down to him and they start fighting and rolling on the ground. Jack is laughing, but when we finally see Ennis' face it becomes apparent that he does not find this a laughing matter. The play-fighting becomes aggressive and they moan and grunt. The sounds within this fighting scene bear a striking resemblance to the sounds when they had sex, and I would argue that these two scenes mirror each other auditorily. This leads me to comparing the fighting and the sex. In both scenes Jack is the initiating part, but Ennis takes control and is the most active part. Both situations are also aggressive. The similarities might suggest that there are strong feelings, beyond aggression, involved in the fighting scene. Fighting is one of the only kinds of closeness that the two of them are "allowed" to share among other people. This is tolerated, and maybe even expected, behaviour of men, so this is the kind of physical closeness they can allow themselves. Thus this is also a form of affection, tough a rough, hard, brutal one.

**Figure 15** (Point-of-view) Ennis in the mirror, Jack watching him.

**Figure 16** Jack looking at Ennis, again.

Various mirroring is used through the film and the scene I mentioned initially, where Jack looked at Ennis in a mirror (see page 73, and Figure 7, page 74 & Figure 8, page 74), is in fact mirrored by a scene just after Ennis and Jack leave the mountain. Jack drives off, looking at Ennis in the side mirror of the car, providing a set of imagery similar to that of the initial scene (Figure 15 & Figure 16). They have spent the summer together and though Jack's face does not reveal much emotion, this time or the last time, all we have experienced until this point makes this a longing look, and maybe a look of love. The first scene where Jack looks at Ennis is added another level of emotion—or a promise of emotions. The obvious mirroring in

these two scenes also reminds us how this relationship started, and how they broke our and their own expectations to arrive at this moment.

### 3.3.3 AFTER BROKEBACK

After Brokeback the two men return to their lives. Ennis starts his life with Alma, who he has mentioned he would marry once back from Brokeback. During a montage of Ennis and Alma's life together we see a time in which they look happy. In one scene they are playing in the snow, laughing, and having a good time. They express feelings in these images, and they are *wrestling* in the snow, which seems to be one of the ways that Ennis is capable of showing affection. These images present Ennis in a "normal" husband-and-wife setting. Though we have seen Ennis have sex with Jack, this "confirms" his claims that he is not "queer". This is cinematically "normal" and heteronormative, Alma is pregnant, and they even look happy.

Jack returns to Brokeback the next summer looking for work, and for Ennis, but he is turned down by Aguirre who emphasises that he does not have a job for Jack specifically and he says: "You boys sure found a way to make the time pass up there. Twist, you guys wasn't getting paid to leave the dogs baby-sit the sheep while you stemmed the rose." Aguirre becomes a personification of the opinion many have about what Jack and Ennis had on Brokeback. Ennis shares this opinion, but as long as they kept it among themselves it was supposed to be "nobody's business". Apparently it was not, because Aguirre reveals that he has made it his business, and now he is refusing Jack work. Their private and intimate relationship has become a public matter and it is making their life difficult.

The sex scene with Alma and Ennis resembles the scene between Ennis and Jack in such a way that this too can be seen as mirroring. Ennis' behaviour in the two scenes resembles each other. In the scene Alma and Ennis have sex they start by kissing, then he turns off the light, and when she wants to kiss him again he turns her around and takes her from behind while she still wears her night gown. She looks disappointed. The scene consists of three shots from when they start kissing until the scene is over, and since Ennis turns the light off, it is rather dark. This time it is even darker than in the tent with Jack. Ennis does not allow for much caressing or foreplay with his wife, but just turns her around and takes her with her clothes on—also similarly to the scene with Jack. The difference might be that with Jack he did not

have the time, while with his wife I suspect he does not bother to take the time. By his actions I am lead to believe that he might consider this one of his many family "obligations".

On one occasion we see Jack in a bar after he has been to the rodeo riding bulls. He approaches the man who acted as rodeo clown and offers to buy him a beer, but the man refuses. Then Jack gives him a look, maybe a fraction of a second too long, and the man changes his expression immediately. He becomes hostile and walks away. Jack gets upset, snaps at the bar keeper when he tries to talk to him, and then he walks out, leaving his beer. We do not get access to Jack's thoughts or intensions, but based on his relationship with Ennis we might expect that he intended to hit on the man. Apparently that was what the man also thought. Still this might have been a misunderstanding. The viewer has had access to Jack's and Ennis's life on Brokeback Mountain, but the rodeo clown has not. Still he picks up on something in Jack's look or behaviour that makes him uncomfortable. Whatever Jack's intentions the man reacts as he does, and this reaction upsets Jack. This takes place after Jack returned to ask for a job on Brokeback Mountain, making this is the second time other people act negatively to Jack's display of feelings. The first time Aguirre had indeed seen them together, but this time the clown just *assumes*. Still, that is enough for him to walk away.

I mentioned how Ennis appears traditionally masculine, and I want to bring up a scene that emphasises his masculinity. It is 4$^{th}$ of July and Ennis and Alma have brought the children to a crowded place to see the fireworks. Some men near them, wearing leather jackets and bandanas, are drinking and acting rude, causing other people to move away. They talk loudly, and "pussy" seems to be a recurring theme for these men. Ennis asks them to keep it down because of the girls, but the man just says "Fuck you". Alma tries to talk Ennis out of doing anything, but Ennis gets up. The two men stand up too, and Ennis warns them again, adding that he does not want trouble. The situation turns physical when Ennis pushes one of the men to the ground, kicks the other in the face, and says to the man: "What about it? Do you wanna lose about half'o your fucking teeth? Huh?" The camera is positioned low, with the man on the ground within the frame, filming upwards toward Ennis (Figure 17, page 85). The camera positioning emphasises Ennis' domination in this situation and allows the viewer, like the man on the ground, to literally look up to Ennis. With the fireworks blazing and shining behind him the imagery seems to celebrate his macho heroism. He defended his family, and with fireworks twinkling with the colours of the American flag, Ennis is the American hero.

In this scene he is American manliness personified, and American manliness is heterosexual. But this is a soft version of the American hero: Ennis is defending his family (Lorentzen, 2004:36), a core value in American society, he is defending the heterosexual and the heteronormative.

**Figure 17** Low-angled camera looking up at Ennis' masculinity being celebrated by fireworks.

This interpretation of the scene is not the only one. There are several possible readings and I will suggest a few alternatives to draw attention to the fact that these are just *interpretations*: One could say that Ennis is saving the perception of masculinity from this other degrading version of masculinity (Ibid., 35). In such a case he is still fighting on the side of "heterosexual values". On the other hand, the men he stands up to are talking about women, and acting overtly heterosexual. Viewed in such a light the situation could be seen as Ennis fighting heterosexuality. Yet another possibility is that what he is actually reacting to is the *public displaying of sexuality*. *He* is not able to express affection for Jack, but these men can "flaunt" their heterosexuality unpunished in a crowd. By presenting different readings of this scene I hope to underline how readings differ with the perspective, background, and focus of the one studying the material. I point this out to emphasise the post-structuralist point that the meaning-making process is in the power of the reader/viewer. I found this scene to be a good example of how different readings are possible, and how they may even be just as plausible.

When Jack finally meets the woman he marries, Lureen, she is beautiful and has several classic feminine traits, but she is also masculine in ways. She is a female horse rider at the rodeo where Jack is a bull rider. She wears a "cowgirl" outfit and he likes her at once. Jack sees Lureen again in the bar later the same night. He is watching her, and he asks the bartender about her, but he does not approach her. On a couple of occasions men walk up to her, but she smiles and shakes her head, like politely refusing them. At last Lureen has to approach *him:* "What you waiting for, cowboy? A mating call?" She is the one who takes the

active and initiating part. This becomes even more obvious in the car afterwards. They are kissing, and then they move to the backseat where she mounts him and takes the rains by kissing him and unbuttoning his shirt. Similarly to the sex scene with Jack and Ennis, *and* the scene with Ennis and Alma, this scene is sparsely lighted. The sex scenes between men and women are not put in a better light than the scene between Ennis and Jack. Also similar to the scene in the tent they are confined to a small, limited space—a car. It seems the film does not allow any of the sex scenes in the film to take more space or be more "romantic" than the scene with Ennis and Jack. The film places them all in the dark, in an uncomfortable situation.

Throughout their marriage Jack often becomes the "weak" part in their relationship. Lureen provides Jack with work in her father's company, and at several occasions Jack is demasculinised by her father. Lureen's father has a very dominant personality, and acts degrading towards Jack. He treats Jack like his errand boy in Jack's proud moment when he has just become a father, and he tries to undermine Jack's family authority at the Thanksgiving dinner table. At this particular instance, though, Jack finally stands up to him and takes back his role as *man* in the family. This time he sets an example for his son and he probably even earns respect from Lureen's father by doing this. He acts like a *man.* Jack's outburst seems to have been uncomfortable to him, and it seems it was a surprise both to his wife and to her father. This is obviously not something they had expected from Jack.

### 3.3.4 ENNIS AND JACK TOGETHER AGAIN

Ennis has received a postcard from Jack dated Sept. 1967: "Friend this letter is long over due. Coming through on the 24th. Drop me a line say if your there. Jack". Alma asks Ennis if this is someone he used to cowboy with, but Ennis lies to her and says they were fishing buddies. This is the beginning of their "coded" life together, where "fishing trips" are their trips away to be together. Ennis writes his reply: "you bet." Once again Jack is the initiating part, contacting Ennis, and Ennis' answer bears evidence of his taciturnity.

Ennis shows little visible attraction or love towards Jack, but then he does not show much emotions in general. Still, his feelings are made visible through other cinematic means, like in the following example where mise-en-scene and performance tell the story of Ennis' feelings and longing. Ennis is waiting for Jack to arrive after having received the postcard. He is eager, and first he sits by the window to wait. The film cuts to an image of Ennis half sitting half

lying on the sofa, at least six empty beer bottles gathered around him (Figure 18). This indicates time has passed, him just waiting. He sits with his eyes closed, forehead leaning against his fist. When he hears a car he gets up. It is Jack. Ennis smiles and runs out. Even though we read little emotion from Ennis' face, this scene manages to capture Ennis' longing. Mise-en-scene can be effective to expressing what has happened or how someone has behaved. In such a case the signs are used indexically (Huening). They are visible indicators or traces of what has happened, and in this case, how Ennis has behaved. The beer bottles are indicia of time passing, of Ennis' impatience, and of the anticipation and fear of Jack not showing (Ibid.).

**Figure 18** Time has passed, indicated by several empty bottles. Ennis is still waiting.

Ennis runs downstairs where they smile and embrace one another. They almost look like they are going to kiss but Ennis starts looking around them. Then he grabs Jack's collar, pushes him against the wall, out of sight, and they kiss passionately. Alma comes to the door and we see a point-of-view shot of Ennis and Jack, indicating that she has seen them. Startled she closes the door and goes inside. She breathes heavily and has to lean on the table. Once again Ennis and Jack have been watched, making their feelings and their actions the business of someone else. For Alma this new information about her husband is obviously a surprise, and an unpleasant one, by the look on her face. She looks shocked, but she manages to keep a straight face when the men come inside the house. It seems she had not expected this side of Ennis, even though she has lived with him for years. Now that she knows, just like the viewer, Alma must adjust her expectations of Ennis. She sees him in a different light and the things he says and does from now on might be interpreted different than before.

Now that they are reunited Ennis and Jack spend the night in a motel. They lie in bed, naked, and both are smoking cigarettes. We do not know if they have just had sex, we can only

assume. Jack asks Ennis what they will do now, whereupon Ennis answers: “I doubt there’s nothing we *can* do. See, I’m stuck with what I’ve got here, and making a living is about all I’ve got time for now”. Through their dialogue we hear how Ennis is being practical and putting his obligations to his family and his job first. Still he goes away to the mountains with Jack. As they drive towards their destination, the weather changes. It starts out with grey clouds, but as they get closer to the mountain the sky is clear blue with white clouds. As mise-en-scene the sky enhances the idyllic situation. They are in their right element and nature is on their side. The film underlines the contrast between the lives they have in the wilderness and in civilisation with this change in weather. Also, the open landscape and widescreen aesthetics of the mountain contrasts the confined, colourless space within the small apartment.

At night they sit by the campfire talking:

JACK

What if you and me had a little ranch somewhere, a little cow-and-calf operation? It’d be a sweet life. Hell, Lureen’s old man, you bet he’d give me a down payment to get lost. He more or less already said it.

ENNIS

No, I… I told you it ain’t gonna be that way. You got your wife and baby in Texas, and you know, I’ve got my life in Riverton.

JACK

Is that so … You and Alma, that’s a life?

ENNIS

Now you shut up about Alma, this ain’t her fault.

Jack reveals his strong feelings for Ennis through dialogue, but Ennis keeps to his obligations to his family. This might be because he wants to do the right thing, but he also makes it clear that he has other reasons for being reluctant: “Bottom line is, we’re around each other and this thing grabs hold of us again, in the wrong place, at the wrong time, then we’re dead.” Ennis tells a story from his childhood when his father brought Ennis and his brother to see a dead rancher. The man had lived with another man, which was reason good enough for some to take his life in a most brutal way. As Ennis tells the story we see images of young Ennis, his

brother and father looking at the corpse. Ennis concludes: “Two guys living together? No way. We can get together once in a while, way the hell out in the middle of nowhere, but…” Jack does not find this satisfying, but Ennis is marked by this childhood incident, and it has shaped his world view. He knows how he feels about Jack, and agrees to get together with Jack “out in the middle of nowhere”, but it is impossible for him to pursue his feelings for Jack. The dead cowboy is the reality he knows, he has seen the consequences, and Ennis shapes his life around his fear of what other people might do if they knew. Through his story and his refusal to start a life with Jack, Ennis proves how his assumptions and expectations control him. He lives with certain expectations to the world, and they control his choices.

#### 3.3.4.1 ALMA AND ENNIS’ MARRIAGE FAILS AND JACK HEARS OF THE “GOOD NEWS”

The second time we see Alma and Ennis in the bed together their marriage is about to fail. Ennis is lying on top of her, and they are kissing.

ALMA

As far as we are behind on the bills it makes me nervous not to take no precautions.

ENNIS

If you don’t want no more of my kids, I’ll be happy to leave you alone.

ALMA

I’d have’em if you’d support’em.

She looks back at him, stone-faced. Then he gets off her, turns around to his side of the bed, and she switches off the lights.

These lines are hurtful, and indicate how their marriage in no longer working. Whether Ennis’ statement is valid for all their years together, or if he has only been feeling this way recently we cannot know, but through this simple line he expresses his reluctance to having sex with her. As we do not know precisely how he has felt about her before, it is difficult to tell whether this is a change in his preferences or if he has always felt this way. There is the possibility that he has never enjoyed the intimacy with his wife, but has just performed his “duties” as a husband. Ennis seems to have a certain mental image of how a family is supposed to be, he has certain expectations to family life. His parents disappeared from his

life early on, and his dedication to his family might be his way of making things right. Still, his heart is not in this relationship, and this scene is directly followed by a scene in a courtroom where they get divorced. All of this is making Ennis' sexuality more unclear to the viewer, and maybe to himself now that he has "failed" as a heterosexual family man.

Jack receives news of the divorce and drives approximately 900 miles from Texas to Riverton, Wyoming. On his way to Ennis Jack is smiling, whistling, tapping the steering wheel, and singing along to "King of the road". He arrives unannounced, acting very hopeful. He suggests he believed that Ennis' postcard was an invitation to them finally building a life together. Ennis shoots down his hope when he tells him that he has the girls this weekend so he cannot. During this scene they just spend one minute and thirty seconds together. Jack must have driven at least fifteen hours to only be granted these one and a half minutes. Jack is devastated and he is crying. This time the song on the radio is "A Love That Will Never Grow Old", and Jack is working hard to keep from falling completely apart. In both car scenes the music is diegetic—it is present within the film universe—and it corresponds with the characters emotions and works in an empathetic way, reinforced by the very different moods and genres of the songs. In the first one the lyrics are even very prominent, and Jack sings along to "King of the road". His feelings are leaking out, he is expressing them very visually through his manner and performance, and the songs enhance the expression of his feelings.

After having visited Ennis Jack drives to Mexico and seeks out a street with prostitutes. When we first see him enter the street, women are standing alongside the walls, but as he moves further into the alley there are men standing along the street. Jack walks up to a young man standing by the wall. The man utters an inquiring "Señor?", whereupon Jack looks at him and nods slightly. They walk beside each other down the street. The end of the street is completely dark, and as they reach beyond the last street light they are completely enclosed in darkness. It is tempting to bring up the symbolism of this imagery. Jack, disappointed of Ennis, looks up a man to comfort him and satisfy his needs, but as he does so, they walk into the darkness, as if this is shady business they are engaging in or it must be kept out of sight.

The issue of visibility of sexuality is present in this scene but it is also an issue that is particularly important to Ennis. During one of Jacks' and Ennis' trips Ennis confesses his worries: "Do you ever get the feeling—I don't now, when you're in town, and someone looks at you, suspicious, like he *knows*? Then you go out on the pavement and everybody's looking

at you like they all know too?" Even though he persistently has claimed not to be queer, in this passage he actually admits that there is *something*, and he is afraid that *it* might be visible. This visibility he fears is probably one of mannerism or appearance, because he is cautious to keep their actions "invisible", away from people. But incidentally *it* has actually been visible on two occasions—one where Aguirre watched them and one where Alma watched them.

#### 3.3.4.2 ENNIS MEETS CASSIE AND JACK MEETS RANDALL

Ennis enters a relationship with a woman named Cassie. He is apparently seduced by her when they first meet, but we do not know if he is ever sexually involved with her. In the case with Cassie, as with Jack, she is the initiating part: She approaches Ennis, persuades him to accompany her on the dance floor, and afterwards she gets him to give her a foot rub. IN time their relationship has to yield to his relationship with Jack. Ennis avoids Cassie for a while until she gives up on him. When she confronts him with this she admits to have fallen in love with him, but he has prioritised Jack, and now he does not seem interested in her at all. She is apparently hurt and angry, but Ennis does not show any emotions at all.

Jack also meets someone: Randall. Jack and Lureen are at a party where they share a table with another couple. The women talk while the men keep silent. At one time Jack looks at Randall, who catches Jack's look and smiles slightly. Jack then looks down. Randall's smile is very brief and suggests he likes Jack, but it might also mean that he is amused by their wives. Later Jack and Randall sit talking outside the party. Randall points out that his employer has a cabin that Randall is allowed to use. Randall makes a suggestion: "We ought to go down there some weekend. Drink a little whisky, fish some. Get away. You know?" Jack looks tempted, but their conversation is interrupted by the women. I ascribe this invitation more than the literal because Randall suggests the go *fishing*. To Ennis and Jack "fishing" has never meant fishing at all, but has become their "code" for getting away to be together. Ennis was even confronted with this by Alma who proved that they never actually did fish. Randall does probably not know of this, but when he suggests this particular activity, the viewer will most likely connect this to what Ennis and Jack have been doing—having sex.

#### 3.3.4.3 THE BEGINNING OF THE END

The last time Jack and Ennis are out "fishing", they talk about their lives, their wives and affairs. Jack says his marriage just as well could have been done over the phone, and adds: "I kinda got this thing going with a … ranch foreman's wife." Randall is foreman of a ranch and during the sequence at the party Jack and Randall seemed to like each other while Jack did not get along with Randall's wife. This leads me to believe that the affair is actually with Randall. The short pause Jack makes within the sentence when he tells Ennis about his affair suggests he is moderating the truth to what he thinks Ennis can handle. Ennis laughs, so apparently he has no problem with Jack being unfaithful (to Lureen or himself) when it is with a woman.

During the conversation Jack admits: "The truth is … Sometimes I miss you so much I can hardly stand it". Jack is courageous in admitting his feelings and he is a very emotional person, which makes it so much harder when Ennis does not respond with the same enthusiasm. Ennis looks at him at first, then looks away, not saying anything. Then the film cuts to the two of them in the tent where Ennis has his arm around Jack. As in many situations Ennis makes his response physically rather than verbally.

The next morning as they pack up to leave Ennis tells Jack that they cannot see each other for a while because of his job. Jack gets upset that Ennis did not bring this up earlier, which brings about an argument where Jack complains that they do not have enough time.

```
                    ENNIS
          Jack, I've got to work, huh. In them early
          days I just quit the job. You forget what
          it's like to be broke all the time. You
          ever heard of child support? All I tell
          you is I can't quit this one and I can't
          get the time off. It was hard enough
          getting this time. The trade-off was
          August. You got a better idea?

                    JACK
                (with a disappointed look)
          I did once.

Ennis approaches Jack, looking angry.

                    ENNIS
          You did once… Have you been to Mexico,
          Jack Twist? 'Cuz I hear what they've got
          in Mexico for boys like you.
```

JACK

Hell, yes I've been to Mexico. Is that a fucking problem?

ENNIS

(between clenched teeth)
I'm gonna tell you this *one* time, Jack fucking Twist. And I ain't fooling. What I don't know, all them things that I don't know, would get you killed if I'd come to know them. I ain't joking.

Ennis walks away from Jack, towards the car.

JACK

Yea, well, try this one, and I'll say it just once.

ENNIS

Go ahead!

JACK

(almost yelling, angry)
I'll tell you what, we could have had a good life together. A fucking real good life. Had us a place of our own. But you didn't want it, Ennis. So what we've got now is Brokeback Mountain. Everything's built on that. That's all we've got, boy, fucking all! So I hope you know that if you don't never know the rest!

Ennis turns away.

JACK (CONT'D)

You count the damn few times we have been together in nearly twenty years, and you measure the short fucking leash you keep me on. And then you ask me about Mexico. And you tell me you'd kill me for needing something I don't hardly never get.

Ennis stands unresponsive with his back to Jack, looking down. He is in the foreground of the picture, out of focus.

JACK (CONT'D)

You have no idea how bad it gets. I mean, I'm not you, I can't make it a few high-altitude fucks once or twice a year. You are too much for me, Ennis.

Jack walks away.

JACK (CONT'D)

You son of a whoreson bitch.
(then, more broken-heartedly)
I wish I knew how to quit you.

Ennis is crying. Lost and confused he turns around and looks at Jack.

ENNIS

Then why don't you? Why don't you just let me be, huh? It's 'cause of you, Jack, that I'm like this. I'm … nothing … nowhere.

Ennis closes his eyes tight, as if struggling with his tears. Jack sees the desperation and goes to comfort Ennis.

JACK

Ennis …

Ennis violently pushes him away, tries to fight him off.

ENNIS

Get the fuck off me!

Jack struggles trough to him and they fall to the ground. Ennis sobs. Jack comforts him.

JACK

It's all right…
(then)
Damn you, Ennis …

ENNIS

I just can't stand this anymore, Jack.

They sit on the ground, Jack holding Ennis.

This sequence illustrates the effect Jack has on Ennis: He makes Ennis step out of character. Ennis breaks with his habits, acts unexpectedly, and shows a complexity in character—because of Jack. For one, this scene shows Ennis *talking* quite a lot. The characters themselves have even commented on this before, and here he does it again. In Jack's company Ennis manages, or allows himself to, express himself verbally.

The scenes is also revealing when it comes to both men's sexuality. During the argument the element that Ennis reacts strongest to is Jack's confession to having been to Mexico. The concept of "going to Mexico" seems to be something people know about and it becomes more than a physical location or a sexual affair. Going to Mexico means crossing a border, it is a choice that Jack makes, and this becomes crucial for his sexual "identity". When Ennis

becomes furious, this raises the questions if this is because he in general does not approve of "going to Mexico", or because Jack has been unfaithful to him with another *man*. He did not react like this when Jack met Lureen or when he mentioned his affair with another woman, but now Jack has had sex with another man, and Ennis gets upset. This suggests the feelings Ennis have for Jack even though he tries to suppress them. This hostile reaction to Jack's confession can also be seen as homophobic, and his outburst might be a reaction to his own actions because he is reminded that this is similar to what he and Jack have done.

When Ennis starts crying this is also something Jack exclusively is privileged to experience. With other people the only emotions Ennis seems capable of showing are anger, and at some times joy, but with Jack he can also break down and sob like a child. This seems physically hard for him to do, but he does it.

After they fall down and Jack tries to comfort Ennis, the film introduces a flashback from their younger years. They are probably on Brokeback during their first summer and Ennis walks up to Jack and puts his arm around him. Ennis acts tenderly, and he starts humming a tune—one that his mother used to sing. When Ennis has to leave for the sheep Jack looks at him as he rides off (Figure 19, page 96 & Figure 20, page 96). The film cuts to present day Ennis driving off, and then to Jack looking at him (Figure 21, page 96 & Figure 22, page 96). The two sets of images have similar composition, the film again applying mirroring.

In the flashback Jack and Ennis had all the time in the world, it was only the two of them, and though Ennis rode off Jack knew he would come back the next day. Now their future is uncertain, they do not know if they will see each other again, and they have left each other after arguing. The two shot pairs, though containing no dialogue, reflect the changes that have happened since the first summer, and tell this complicated story through composition. In neither of these images Jack expresses much emotion, but in the flashback (Figure 20, page 96) there is a calmness and longing present in his face that are not present in Jack of today (Figure 22, page 96). The present-day Jack rather frowns slightly and appears more worried or tense. The composition and the depth of field enhance the air of the images: The flashback contains a close-up image (Figure 20, page 96) with a shallow depth of field where the focus is on Jack while the background is completely out of focus. The forest behind Jack is merely a green, blurry backdrop, isolating him from the surroundings. Also the camera moves a little—first towards him, and then it arcs in front of him as he slightly turns his head—blurring the

background further. The second shot of Jack (Figure 22) is composed as a medium close-up, including the roof of the car, and trees and mountains in the background. The depth of field is larger, making the surroundings and the background more distracting. This time the camera is also static, giving us time to take in the surroundings, providing a more stressed feeling.

**Figure 19** Jack looking at Ennis riding off (flashback).

**Figure 20** Close-up of Jack looking at Ennis (flashback).

**Figure 21** Ennis driving off (present day).

**Figure 22** Medium close-up of Jack looking at Ennis (present day).

It is possible to consider these shots as foreshadowing what happens next. In the flashback (Figure 19) Jack is within the frame the whole time during which we see Ennis getting on the horse and riding off. The camera is positioned behind Jack when it shoots Ennis, and when the camera pans from one side of Jack to the other to follow Ennis, we see Jack within the frame at all times. In the second image of Ennis leaving (Figure 21), the camera is static and Jack is not within the frame. The absence of Jack can be seen to point towards his death.

The scene when Ennis receives news of Jack's death consists of only three shots: An establishing shot of the post office; a follow shot tracking alongside Ennis as he walks away from the post office until the camera halts, whereupon it arcs around from Ennis' side to his

back (Figure 23); and a point-of-view shot of Ennis' mail (Figure 24). By arcing around to Ennis' back when he discovers what is in his mail, we are again deprived of Ennis' reaction or expression of emotions. At a crucial and emotional moment the camera distances itself from Ennis and does not show his face. The perceptual subjective image of his mail reveals that a postcard he has previously sent Jack has been returned with a stamp saying "Deceased".

**Figure 23** Camera arcing to Ennis' back.

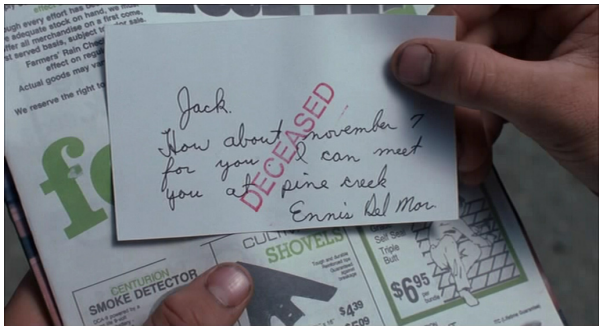


**Figure 24** Point-of-view shot of mail.

**Figure 25** Close-up of Lureen telling Ennis about Jack.

**Figure 26** Close-up of Ennis listening/visualising.

**Figure 27** Very wide shot of Jack being beaten (mental subjectivity).

**Figure 28** Medium close-up of Jack being beaten (mental subjectivity)

Ennis calls Lureen (Figure 25), who tells of how Jack was killed while pumping a tire: It blew up and hit him in the face. While she is talking we are shown a scene where men are beating Jack up (Figure 27 & Figure 28), the visual contradicting the auditory. Showing these images

while Lureen talks might indicate that this is what she knows happened while she is giving Ennis the "official story". Another possibility is that none of the characters are thinking this, but that we as viewers are privileged to know the truth of what happened to Jack. Still, the interpretation I find most plausible is that this is the scenario Ennis visualises—these are his thoughts. This is supported by the close-ups of Ennis before and after the mental subjective scene (Figure 26, page 97), and by the fact that the mental subjective scene does not end until Lureen has said "hello" twice to regain Ennis' attention. His appalled look shows us that he did not imagine this as a punishment for Jack, but rather that he is afraid that this is what happened. This is a visualisation of his fears.

After Ennis has received the news of Jack's death he goes to visit Jack's parents. Jack's father does not come across as an emotional man, but he seems angry or bitter about Jack's decisions. Maybe this is a man Ennis can relate to.

JACK'S FATHER

Ennis Del Mar, he used to say. I'm gonna bring him up here one of these days and we'll lick this damn ranch into shape. Had some half-baked notion the two of you was gonna move up here. Build a cabin, help run the place. Then this spring he had another fellow gonna come up here with him. Build a place, help run the ranch. Some ranch neighbor of his from down in Texas. Was gonna split up with his wife and come back here. So he says. But like most of Jack's ideas … Never come to pass.

These words make an impact on Ennis. Jack has actually talked about him over the years, but then he started talking about someone else. Being critical to dialogue is important, and whether Jack's father is telling the whole truth, and whether Jack has told his father the whole truth, we cannot know. But the speech affects Ennis and he looks hurt.

Ennis is invited to see Jack's room where, in the wardrobe, he finds his own blood stained shirt—the one he believed he had forgotten on Brokeback Mountain the first summer. It hangs inside Jack's shirt. This scene is a strong indication of the feelings Jack must have had already the first summer. Ennis looks at the shirts, holds them close, and seems to breathe in the shirts, closing his eyes (Figure 29, page 99). If Ennis ever believed that Jack was just in it for the sex, this is his physical evidence that it had always been more than that. Ennis is allowed to keep the shirts and they bag them, not saying a word. He has tears in his eyes.

**Figure 29** Ennis has found the shirts. His behaviour visualises his strong emotions.

**Figure 30** Ennis buttoning the shirt, his back to the camera during an emotional moment.

In the last scene Ennis is in his trailer. He has just been visited by his daughter and as she left her jumper, he goes to put it in his closet. When he opens the door we can see that the two shirts hang on the inside of the closet door, beside a postcard with a picture of a mountain, probably Brokeback Mountain (Figure 30). These pieces of props—the two shirts—are elevated to symbols of the two characters. The shirts embrace each other on their wire hanger, and when Ennis placed the shirts in his closet he put his own shirt outside Jack's. One could elaborate on the closet allegory of this scene, but I will just keep to mentioning it.

Ennis buttons Jack's shirt with tears in his eyes, whispering, almost just breathing the words: "Jack, I swear …" This short line closes the film. What he means exactly is open to discussion, but there are a lot of feelings in the words uttered, and there seems to be regret. Maybe the words mean "Jack, I swear, if I had only known how much I meant to you I would have given us the chance". The line is short but it is a highly charged piece of dialogue. Ennis straightens the postcard and closes the door. The view from his window is rather bleak and dull compared to what we have seen on Brokeback Mountain …

# CHAPTER 4
# QUEERING MEDIATION AND SEXUALITY

## 4.1 INTRODUCTORILY

In this chapter I will compare and contrast certain aspects of the two movies to shed light on various features that only become visible by looking at them side by side or by looking at the movies as pieces of their particular time. I also take an even further step back and look *outside* these particular movies and place them in a film historical context. In my first chapter I posed a secondary problem statement which leads me to discuss how these particular representations of male same-sex sexuality relate to classic cinematic traditions of Hollywood film. In so doing I examine different ways in which these protagonists and these movies relate to cinematic traditions, such as my main focus, how they relate to traditions of representing "homosexuality", how they relate to western genre traditions, and I also consider how they relate to other conventions and stylistic traditions.

## 4.2 CINEMATIC (HOMO)SEXUALITY

### 4.2.1 SEX!

The first aspect I want to dwell on, a crucial element that distinguishes Joe, Ennis and Jack from most every mainstream cinematic homosexual, is the fact that these particular characters have *sex with men*. And importantly, they have sex with men *on-screen*. "There is a solid argument to be made that '"Brokeback Mountain" is the first mainstream American film to portray gay love straightforwardly -- not in the context of an issue film about AIDS, not as a campy side plot, but as old-fashioned melodrama, with moony eyes and explicit sex" (Weiss, 2005). There is a long mainstream film history when the best descriptions we can come up with is that the film had homosexual overtones, or that the characters in question could be interpreted as homosexual, or acted homosexual, i.e. feminine etc. I have browsed the account of history of sexuality in film offered on the website *The Greatest Films*. The site provides such descriptions as this one about *Ben Hur*: "Acclaimed director William Wyler's Best Picture winner contained an interesting, non-overt homosexually-tinged subtext in the relationship of Messala (Stephen Boyd) and Judah Ben-Hur (Charlton Heston)" (Sex in

Cinema: Part 13, *The Greatest Films*). A film that fits the description "non-overt homosexually-tinged subtext" has a rather vague relationship to homosexuality … And such is the nature of the relationship between Hollywood and homosexuality.

In the 1987 edition of *The Celluloid Closet* Vito Russo writes: "There is no mainstream motion picture in which two men do anything more sexual than kiss each other, and even that simple act is still approached with trepidation by filmmakers and greeted with cries of outrage from audiences and critics alike" (Russo, [1981] 1987:294). Russo does address *Midnight Cowboy* during the book but he does not to emphasise Joe's encounter in the theatre the way I do. Russo considers *Midnight Cowboy* as one of several buddy films of the late 1960s which introduced screen homosexuals to draw suspicion away from the buddies. He claims that the film presents Joe as a virginal, innocent victim while the film's "real" homosexuals are villains (Russo, [1981] 1987:80). I tend not to agree with Russo on his remarks about *Midnight Cowboy*. I do not consider Joe as "virginal" or innocent, and his many sexual encounters and the violent incident with Towny supports this. I ascribe the film an ironic distance to sexuality, and I see it as essential that Joe indeed has sex with a man while none of the "real" (reel) homosexuals do. I have discussed the fellatio scene during my analysis, and one of my points is that he chooses to have sex with this man rather than get a dishwasher job, making this a voluntary act—a choice. Admittedly, the "action" of Joe receiving oral sex takes place off-screen, but we see them together and we see the man bend toward Joe's crotch. The film is therefore not groundbreakingly daring in its visual depiction of homosexual sex acts, but still there no doubt about what is going on in this scene.

*Brokeback Mountain* takes mainstream mediation of sex between men to a whole new level. As viewers we get to see them kissing, and when they have sex for the first time we see the "whole act" without interruptions, both men visible within the frame. We also see them in other situations of intimacy. To my knowledge sex between men in a major studio film has never been as explicit. Of course, outside Hollywood there are several examples of more explicit and experimental material, not to forget porn being a film tradition of its own.

In the article "Rape Fantasies: Hollywood and Homophobia" film scholar Joe Wlodarz points out that even though there are more and more films with gay images in contemporary Hollywood cinema, gay sex is absent. He goes on to talking about how anal sex is rarely represented in Hollywood film, except when it takes the shape of rape. He mentions a few

titles in which male rape is portrayed and draws attention to how there are no gay men present in these representations (Wlodarz in Lehman, 2001:67-68). Wlodarz argues that through rape revenge movies the act of anal sex becomes a damaging and avengeable trauma. In linking sex to AIDS and how AIDS has lead to increased anxiety of anal sex, he introduces the potential violence of sex, and in extension he connects anal penetration to suicide. Though I do not agree with all of Wlodarz' arguments, I do agree that if rapes are the only representation of anal sex in mainstream films, the imbalance in representation is obvious. With such a system of representation gay men are violated (Lehman, 2001:68, 73, 78).

In *Midnight Cowboy* the meaning of the sequence where Joe is anally raped is unclear. The dream in which the sex takes place has the shape of a nightmare, the whole sequence comes across as a traumatic scenario, and Joe looks terrified—but it is a *dream*. This makes the nature of the rape and its connection to Joe's reality and his fantasy life diffuse. In his conscious state Joe's intention is to have sex with women, and he does, but he has made a separation that distances sex from love. Sex for him is work. As such not only Joe's sexuality is complicated but also his relationship to sexuality. He dreams and fantasises about sex he does not seem to enjoy. One could say that this separation between sex and emotions is a masculine trait, while women are usually the ones stereotypically portrayed as dependent and wanting a relationship. But "masculine" or not, the "professional" relationship Joe has to sex might "excuse" his same-sex sexual experiences. The argument might sound: he is not a "fag", he does this just to survive and his motivation is *money*.

*Brokeback Mountain* liberates its representation of this stigmatising representation of gay sex and is therefore an important contribution to film history. When Ennis and Jack have (indeed anal) sex it does not take place in the setting of rape, but in a loving and caring relationship. Through this combination of love and sex these men are making film history. The sex scenes between the two men in *Brokeback Mountain* are emotional acts, while the sex within their respective marriages (at least on Ennis' part) seems to rather be of a practical nature. But Jack's and Ennis' marriages have a legitimating function for them, because by having married women they prove to the world that they are really heterosexual, and the sex they share with each other can be excused.

### 4.2.2 STEREOTYPES?

As shown in Chapter 2, Hollywood films usually rely on stereotypes when representing homosexuality. In that respect these movies are rather untraditional, or *queer*. Joe, Ennis nor Jack fit the established homosexual stereotypes. What makes the non-stereotypy of Joe even more obvious are the characters within the film who *do* fit cinematic homosexual stereotypes, and who function as foils to Joe. Stereotypes are a way to keep the represented "contained". Without stereotypes, without any visible signifiers, anyone can be queer, and the paranoia in society after Kinsey released his reports suggests that people want to know who is what (Benshoff and Griffin, 2006:15). But the protagonists are not the overtly effeminate pansies or sissies, they are not your psychotic, villainous, or monstrous threat, and though they do not claim a homosexual or queer "identity" they are not tragically neurotic in denying their feelings (Ibid., 14). Also, even though they are masculine, they are not "hyper-masculine" in the way that would become a common gay "look" in the 1970s (Piontek, 2006:58).

The cowboy apparel, in particular the hat with its iconic status, has traditionally become a signifier of a certain kind of heterosexual masculinity, but Piontek explains how the gay "clone" was inspired by the masculinity of the cowboy (Ibid.). In the two movies the characters have different motivation for dressing this way, and the effect of this particular clothing is quite different in the two movies. Joe's cowboy is a trimmed, conceited and vain one; Jack's cowboy is a hard working but lively and at times failed one; while Ennis' cowboy is genuine with no attempt to put on an act to be something he is not. I still argue that none of the protagonists become "clones" by their attire. Jack and Ennis are working class men, and though their clothing and the way they come off visually might resemble the "clone", they are rather "the original", what inspired the "clone" look. They *are* cowboys; they do not just dress like them. Ennis' cowboy hat is worn and dirty; Ennis and Jack both have worn boots; they wear plain, one-coloured or patterned shirts, faded blue jeans, and practical jackets for their pursuits. As far as I can tell they do not dress this way as a statement of fashion or sexuality, but because it is practical and their jobs demand it.

Joe on the other hand has bought his western apparel recently, and takes his brand new hat and boots out of their boxes. His shirts are not the simple kind, but have fancy embroideries of birds and flowers. He dresses as this cowboy persona with an intention, but he is mistaken for a "clone". Piontek writes about this hyper-masculinity as a phenomenon that developed

during the 1970s, but in *Midnight Cowboy* we already see evidences of this trend. We see the gay cowboys of 42nd Street, and it is made clear that this look is "strictly for fags". Joe, unaware of this trend, must be distinguished from this, and the film makes a point out of the misunderstanding and repeatedly underlines the new "homosexuality" of the cowboy. Piontek argues that the hyper-masculinity of the gay culture in its attempts to take on an exaggerated masculinity essentially is feminine (Ibid., 59). Similarly Joe becomes feminine in his energetic attempts to be perceived as masculine. Caring about appearance is a feminine trait, and in trying to be masculine, he indeed becomes feminine. There are therefore similarities between Joe's act and the "clone", but they are essentially different.

Though at first look *Midnight Cowboy* and *Brokeback Mountain* might seem to reinforce old Hollywood traditions in regard to stereotypical representations, in my opinion they do not. I see them as taking a critical stand to Hollywood and its representations of sexuality. This is not Hollywood killing off homosexuals, but a critique of Hollywood's and society's homophobia. Jackie and Towny of *Midnight Cowboy* are indeed stereotypes, and they fit with the tendencies and trends of Hollywood film history: As Russo has observed, the sissies became mean throughout the 1960s, and the effeminate Jackie is such a character. Also, violence against homosexual characters increased towards the end of the 1960s, a lot of queer characters were being killed (Russo, [1981] 1987), and the miserable Towny is exposed to violence (by Joe's hand). Therefore these portrayals are absolutely timely. Also, in *Brokeback Mountain* Jack dies. There is an ambiguity to how he dies, but he *does* die, and Ennis had previously experienced a situation where a man was killed for living with another man. Even though the films use the stereotypes and the "stereotypical action", I would argue that they do not present the characters like this in tradition with the classic Hollywood film, but rather as critique. *Midnight Cowboy* depicts a society in the process of changing. Its rugged, urban, independent film quality and its association with the Warhol and underground scene support my claim that it depicts the "homosexual" characters with self-reflexivity. *Brokeback Mountain*, with its retrospective look towards the 1960s, depicts a society not that different from that of contemporary USA, and shows that though much has changed since 1963, obviously we have not come far. Homophobia is still an issue, and hate crimes still take place. By showing what happened then, the film comments on what happens now. In this way *Midnight Cowboy* offers a hope for the future which *Brokeback Mountain* diminishes.

When Piontek writes about the 1960s USA, he says that "[c]oming out became the quintessential expression of the 1960s" (Piontek, 2006:21), and *Midnight Cowboy* was released within this mentality. When Joe comes to NY he winds up in the middle of various gay stereotypes, some "out" and some "in" ("out" gays represented by Jackie, and the "in" gays represented by Towny). *Midnight Cowboy* plays with the closet concept when it presents such opposite gay stereotypes, while this is not a concept that applies to Joe. He is neither in one nor outside one. Sex to him is just sex, and his identity is independent of his actions and does not change after any of the sexual acts he is involved in (or thinks about). This closet mentality is also a part of *Brokeback Mountain*. As I repeatedly return to, these characters are complex, and the feelings Ennis has for Jack he might never have experienced for any other man. Jack is the only one of the protagonists who might actually be in a closet. He knows of his attraction to men and he tries to hide it, at least from his wife, but he has spoken about Ennis and his hopes for them to his parents, and as such he is "out" in a way. But this is not New York City where homosexuality might even be trendy and where you are "in" if you are "out". Ennis has seen the result of an "out" couple, and he fears this is what has happened to Jack. What is in the closet in a manner, though, is Ennis and Jack's relationship. They are hiding their secret from their wives by lying about it.

Homosexual stereotypes, as with stereotypes in general, develop as film and society develop, but what they usually have in common is that they are not particularly accurate representations of reality. The feminine homosexual is built on a dated understanding of sexuality and gender, but he usually makes good entertainment, and despite his frail roots in reality he is kept alive on film. The danger is that some people do not see that there is a difference between stereotypes and reality. Some will believe in these representations. This is ultimately a risk with all stereotypes. It is all the more important to deviate from the conventions, the stereotypes, and the norms from time to time, like *Midnight Cowboy* and *Brokeback Mountain* do. Though the mainstream film's main goal might be to entertain, it has a certain social responsibility. Unbalanced, one-sided and stigmatising representations reinforcing old, dated stereotypes of sexuality based identities are potentially dangerous and have the power to keep segregating, and maintaining homophobia. Therefore varied depictions, also in mainstream films, are important to establish a nuanced picture. Through saying this I am assigning Hollywood films more power over people than they might be entitled to, but ultimately a lot of what we have learned about how to be, how to act, how to

talk etc, come from film (Benshoff and Griffin, 2006; Gabbard and Luhr, 2008). However persistently anyone would argue that Hollywood film is merely entertainment, I maintain my position that Hollywood film does convey and partly construct social norms and values and therefore, Hollywood has a certain social responsibility.

I will raise yet another point regarding the protagonists and stereotypes. I have concluded that Joe, Ennis and Jack are complex, round characters with multiple layers. They develop during the story and reveal unexpected sides of themselves, and thus they are not stereotypes or character types, but rather novelistic characters (Dyer, [1993] 2002). They all step out of character at times: Joe is in New York to live off other people, but he helps Ratso and puts his own convictions and plans second. Ennis is the stone-faced Marlboro-man who breaks down and cries because of Jack. Jack seems to know himself and lives by his convictions, but also Jack steps out of his comfortable zone, and for instance he stands up to Lureen's father though it is apparent that he finds it uncomfortable. The characters break with expectations.

Complexity of character is not atypical of Hollywood representations, as characters benefit from being round and multi-levelled. They need to develop to be interesting and to involve the viewer. What is atypical of Hollywood is the fact that in these cases the complexity has to do with *sexuality*. Conservative Hollywood is careful not to offend the religious and right-wing groups, and film history shows how Hollywood tends to succumb to their pressure. There is always an economic imperative for large studios, so the commercial mainstream movie business cannot afford to be too radical. Still they need to push the limits to develop and to shock just enough to be interesting, but not so much as to scare people away. *Midnight Cowboy* and *Brokeback Mountain* are rather daring films in their character portrayals and they are evidences that Hollywood dares once in a while.

### 4.2.3 IF NOT, THEN WHAT?

On the protagonists' relationship to their own sexuality and to sexuality in general I would say that Joe seems to expect heterosexuality of himself, but he actively interprets other people's sexuality, and he does not react negatively to others being "faggots". He actually expresses that he is pleased so many in New York are "tutti-frutties" because they will not be direct competition to his line of work. This indicates that he is not homophobic, and he does not necessarily have a heteronormative comprehension, but he assumes heterosexuality of

himself. Jack seems to actively defy heteronormativity through seeking out the male prostitute and through speaking to Ennis and to his parents about building a life with Ennis. Still he tries to keep a heterosexual appearance. His actual feelings for his wife are never voiced explicitly, and I am in no position to say whether he actually loves her or not. Therefore I will not suggest if the marriage is merely a charade or if he indeed loves her, but regardless of this it is evident that his feelings for Ennis are strong, and that they have been for many years. Ennis, I would say, has a heteronormative conviction, and expects heterosexuality, even of himself, but he breaks with this in action. He only allows himself to act on his feelings for Jack when he is convinced nobody watches. No one can know. His attitude to sexuality in general seems to be that it is a private matter, heterosexuality and homosexuality alike.

#### 4.2.3.1 PUBLIC SEX: SOCIETY CARING AND QUEERING

I have made this attempt to put the mediated sexuality of these chosen characters into words without trying to define them as one thing or the other. But while I queerly seek to liberate them of labelling, the discussions in the aftermath of the release of *Brokeback Mountain* seem to indicate that viewers have very strong opinions regarding the protagonists' sexuality. With the Internet as an arena for discussing the characters, people from all over the world partake and provide their opinion. The discussions in the seemingly never-ending threads in online forums (*The Ultimate Brokeback Forum*) indicate how important sexuality seems to be, and the importance of actually labelling sexuality. It is also indicative of the position films and their fictional characters hold in our society. Sexuality has increasingly become a social matter, and it becomes more and more important to know with whom, how, and why other people have sex. I would argue that film, and other popular media, play a significant role in making sexuality a social aspect. In film we are allowed to see people do these private things when we are invited into the bedroom. In the online forums in question the characters are being discussed in terms of real people (not just "reel" people), fans arguing about their sexuality. There is apparently a need to talk about them, to fix them in categories. These discussions, and also opinions about their sexuality in various articles and reviews of *Brokeback Mountain*, show the need to categorise and structure sexuality, and the frustration when people do not fit. One solution, as Kinsey introduced in the 1940s, is to place individuals on a sliding scale where they are more or less homosexual/heterosexual but

sexuality is based on *gender*, and in that case, should we introduce a sliding scale on which people are more or less feminine/masculine whereon which they must be placed beforehand?

Some will define the characters of *Midnight Cowboy* and *Brokeback Mountain* as gay because they show the "symptom" of having sex with other men; while others claim there is no doubt that they are indeed bisexual because they have sex with *both* men and women. In the book *Bisexual Characters in Film* Wayne Bryant goes through film history looking at characters he claims are bisexual. He lists various *bisexual stereotypes* and their functions in films, and he mentions *Midnight Cowboy's* Joe in this book's chapter on hustlers, or bisexual male prostitutes. Bryant's contribution is an interesting one as he illuminates characters who have largely been in the shadows or deemed "homosexual", and in a way his book is queer in its attempt to show alternatives to strictly "homo or hetero". But at the same time this is yet another category that will ultimately exclude some people.

I have picked out some of the comments I have come across applying the term "bisexual" about *Brokeback Mountain*'s protagonists. In a review of the film for *Pittsburgh Tribune-Review* Ed Blank writes matter-of-factly that this is a "depiction of an affair between two bisexual cowboys" (Blank, 2006). Kent Williams' review for *Isthmus* states that "Ennis and Jack aren't exactly gay. They're bisexual, a term that can refer to any number of living arrangements" (Williams, 2006). Godfrey Cheshire of *Independent Weekly* concurs with the previous, and as he reflects on the terms used he says that

> […] Lee's film has enjoyed both curiosity and novelty value in being known as the "gay cowboy movie." Never mind that its protagonists are actually bisexual sheep herders. The vernacular tagline proved so effective that you can still practically hear Universal Pictures' advertising department breathing a collective sigh of relief at not having to sell America on "that bi shepherds flick"" (Cheshire, 2006).

Cheshire touches upon the exact points I set out to explore: these men are not really *gay*, or even *cowboys*, but it is simpler saying that they are.

Ryan Lee also explores this in "Probing the 'Brokeback Syndrome': Can a Straight Man Fall in Love with Another Man?", an article about *Brokeback Mountain* where he includes statements from different people claiming to having identified the characters' "real" sexuality. Lee's article quotes Gyllenhaal, the actor playing Jack, saying he "approached the story believing that these are actually two straight guys who fall in love" (Lee, 2006). It continues to quote gay rights advocates dismissing that the characters are anything but gay, and he

claims the director, Ang Lee, has admitted that the bond between them is indeed a gay relationship. On the other hand bisexual activists ask "What makes them *not* bisexual?" Others again argue that the act is homosexual but that the characters are more complex (Ibid.).

With diversity in expressions of gender and sexuality, more terms are introduced to cover all aspects. Judith Butler criticises the use of categories and labels and points to how they are always inadequate. With the intention of *including,* people will often list as many groups as possible and then add an "etc." at the end. Though this obviously is an attempt to include, it just becomes a way of *excluding* (Butler, [1990] 2007:196). Butler mentions this in relation to feminism and gender, but the case is the same with sexuality, illustrated by "inclusive" terms like "LGBTQ" (Lesbian-Gay-Bisexual-Transgender/Transsexual-Queer). This particular acronym has been expanded since the original "LGB" in order not to be exclusive. The embarrassing "etc." that Butler talks about is difficult to get rid of, and might not be *possible* to get rid of, but by introducing even more terms, and more sub-groups, the exclusion of some will still be upheld. Even with the introduction of terms like "clone" to describe a (hyper)masculine homosexual, this does not make the protagonists I study easier to label.

#### 4.2.3.2 QUEER!

Even though Ennis states: "You know I ain't queer …", and I claim I do not want to label or define Joe, Ennis or Jack, I argue that is *queer* in fact the best way to describe them. I am reluctant to applying present day terms to describe phenomena of the past but what I seek to express by calling them queer is that they are fascinating examples of indefinable sexualities, queer sexualities. I do not seek to "label" them *queer* in a manner of identity, as within queer theory "queer" is usually not used about identities the way queer activists used the term.

Queer theory rather opens up categories and allows for a fluidity of sexuality. These three particular characters represent something complicated, more in the lines of New Queer Cinema and independent films. Like in the New Queer Cinema these characters *lose their orientation* rather than having it *confirmed* (Stacey and Street, 2007:10). As a viewer I do not feel I leave these movies with a sense of understanding the sexuality of the characters. They puzzle me. Hollywood films, like most popular culture, contribute to a simplistic and binary understanding of sexuality. Very rarely do they attempt to deconstruct the hierarchical meanings of sexuality, but these mainstream movies actually *do*.

Robert Lang also discusses *Midnight Cowboy* in relation to sexuality and identity, and writes that this "[…] movie is the first scandalously queer film to come out of Hollywood, and as such poses questions about sexual-identity formation that seem more relevant than ever to our own "postmodern" moment in which some of us have come to see gender as "performative"" (Lang, 2002:7). Sexuality (like gender), according to a queer view and theorists like Butler, is *performative*, not *essential*. We *are* not our sexuality (Butler, [1990] 2007). As such these protagonists seem to be of a rather queer standpoint since identity-wise none of them consider themselves to be any particular sexuality. It is in Ennis' and Jack's right to state that they are not queer, but in their time—more than today—how you behave sexually, who you have sex with, defined your sexuality. In his act of refusing a label, in claiming he is not what he does, Ennis is queer. Joe is also doing sexuality without claiming his actions as identity. He views it as a source of income, and he has sex with both men and women for money, but this is separate from who he is. In this manner he has a queer relationship to sexuality.

### 4.3 GENRE & GENDER: DO(NN)ING JOHN WAYNE

The analysis brought up how *Midnight Cowboy* seems to underline the performativity of gender and sexuality, and how clothing becomes an important signifier in construction and representation of identity (Lang, 2002:146). The performativity is not as striking with Jack or Ennis, and I would argue that their masculinity is presented as more "natural", them living in and with nature on Brokeback Mountain, part of something seemingly genuine. Still, their masculinity is no less performed. The fact that this is a *movie* underlines the performativity of gender and other aspects of "identity". Joe, Jack and Ennis are played by actors, and their clothes are merely costumes supplied by a costume department. Our understanding of their masculinity and of their personality is based on the performance of character. In Judith Butler's book *Gender Trouble* she argues that gender is a performance also in real life, but it is not so much *one act* but rather several acts performed over time. Through repetition they create the meaning that is perceived as "natural", what is usually taken to be the essence of the genders (Butler, [1990] 2007:xv). "As in other ritual social dramas, the action of gender requires a performance that is *repeated*. This repetition is at once a re-enactment and reexperiencing of a set of meanings already socially established; and it is the mundane and ritualized form of their legitimation" (Ibid., 191). In this sense film offers a "double performativity". The performance of the actors is a level that is obvious as an act and does

just barely attempt to conceal its artifice, and the performance of the character is another level more in the line of performances of identity in reality.

I now return to addressing the films in relation to the western genre. Both *Midnight Cowboy* and *Brokeback Mountain* apply the iconography of the genre but one could also claim that they are western tales in the sense that they focus on male bonding and are tales of exploring new frontiers. The western is traditionally an exploring genre, with ideals of expansion and civilising (Schatz, 1981:46). Even though this is not the kind of exploring that Joe, Ennis or Jack do, I would argue that it is still a plausible connection. The characters are not moving westwards or conquering land, but they move into unknown sexual territory and explore beyond this new frontier. *Brokeback Mountain* takes us even further into the western genre with its vast and rugged landscape. I avoid labelling the characters, and I am not going to label the movies as one genre or the other. This is no project of defining either the movies or the characters' sexuality, but I seek to shed light on various, even contradictory sides to show the complexity, and to show the inadequacy of the labelling and categories available.

As introduced during Chapter 2, the western genre and the westerner has gone through an evolution, but some characterisations, some representations of the westerner seem to persist and survive in the memory of the audience. "[N]o player in the long history of the cinema has been as important as John Wayne in showing men what it means to be masculine" (Gabbard and Luhr, 2008:3). John Wayne became an ideal, the ultimate image of American masculinity. This star image faded as American culture changed, though. His particular masculine expression, which had fit American mainstream culture and was appreciated in the 1950s, was considered "reactionary" by the 1970s (Ibid., 6). *Midnight Cowboy*, of 1969, acknowledges this tendency and offers a critique and a form of parody on this particular masculinity. *Brokeback Mountain*, on the other hand, offers a retrospective view that is more nostalgic, but it still holds a critique of the masculine. *Brokeback Mountain* elevates and praises some sides of the masculinity Ennis represents, while at the same time it strikes against the aggressive, intolerant, homophobic sides of both Ennis and other characters in the film.

As addressed in the analysis Joe finds himself in the middle of a situation when the perception of the masculinity of John Wayne is changing and he is misread. Jack and Ennis on the other hand do not encounter this. The setting is different, as Jack and Ennis find themselves in rural settings similar to the one Joe leaves. When we see Ennis in the 1980s he still wears the same

kind of clothes he wore in 1963. In this way he has not changed, and the immediate world around him has not changed much in this sense either. This shows how not only time but also how *place* is crucial in creating and interpreting identities. Both films are set in the USA, but time has not caught up with rural Wyoming the same way it has with urban New York.

Having arrived at the conclusion that these protagonists represent something different than the traditional homosexual stereotypes, and that they follow (and break with) certain western genre conventions, I am lead to ask "why"? What effect do the movies achieve by presenting the characters this way? I suspect that this is not Hollywood's way of stepping up and taking responsibility by depicting much needed alternatives. Earning money is an important goal for commercial cinema, and they do not provide alternatives for the sake of the alternatives. They have a motive, and I would suggest that in these cases they aim to surprise.

These movies are able to play with the expectations to genre conventions and homosexual stereotypes because they have been established and repeated over many years, and they are heavily incorporated in our mentality. Gendered and sexual behaviour have become part of the genre and stereotype conventions, and breaking with them creates surprise. The assumption of heterosexuality is strong in general, but in particular in the western genre it is taken for granted and expected. Both these films play with the masculine and heteronormative western genre and combine it with homosexuality—cinematically established as feminine—building up images of masculinity, and then showing the men having sex with other men. In doing so they create a plot surprise through character establishment, but also a film historical surprise, since Hollywood traditionally does not show gay male sex. On her writing on the femme (the feminine lesbian) Chris Holmlund looks at the strong assumptions of heterosexuality, and how a feminine lesbian easily can "pass" as heterosexual. Images can be misleading, and in the case of masculine cinematic homosexuals their "gayness" is not visible but when they are with their lover (Holmlund, 2002:35). I believe that "misleading" is particularly what *Brokeback Mountain*, and to some extent *Midnight Cowboy*, seem to be aiming for.

## 4.4 OTHER ASPECTS OF FILM STYLE AND CHARACTERISATION

*Brokeback Mountain* is a good piece of film, and overall it is rather conventional in form and style (in line with classic Hollywood film), for instance in the application of mental

subjectivity. When the film includes its flashback of young Ennis and the dead cowboy it is clear what we are being shown and why. In the mental subjective scene where Ennis talks to Lureen on the phone, there is more room for interpreting the situation, but also in this scene the film is rather clear in its message. When *Midnight Cowboy* on the other hand presents its flashbacks, or sequences showing thoughts or dreams, it is more difficult to interpret and understand. The function of the mental subjective sequences in the narrative is ambiguous. Making Joe's identity and sexuality a question of interpretation in this manner, the film opens for a "queerer" understanding of Joe.

In addition to complicating Joe's sexuality these sequences also complicate our relationship to him and his trustworthiness as a character. Some of the mental subjective images, such as the rape dream, have such an expressionistic character they do not seem like reality. We cannot be certain of their reliability. Still they are part of the character's inner life and reality even though they might not be part of an "objective" reality. Since these sequences are often ambiguous, they complicate the narrative. The story is not obvious, and the storytelling is not invisible (Bordwell et al., [1985] 2004). The viewer is invited to interpret more actively than is usual for classic Hollywood productions. Being such a complex piece of cinematic work, *Midnight Cowboy* is not a dreamy escape. Even the characters are looking for a dreamy escape from their hardship and struggle, i.e. everyday life.

I repeatedly argue that these movies are indeed queer in different ways, such as in their character representation and use of genre, but "queer" is not necessarily what (even "queer") audiences want in a film. Benshoff and Griffin call attention to this in saying that queer movie goers do not necessarily want experimental and avant-garde, but are comfortable with the classic Hollywood style. Therefore independent film makers gave them queer themes in a mainstream wrapping (Benshoff and Griffin, 2004:12). Queer material that is "queer" both in content and form is challenging and it not only encourages but *demands* the reader or viewer to think. Also queer theoretical texts, like those of Foucault or Butler, are difficult and demanding reading by virtue of both their content and form. Judith Butler admits her own "difficulty of style" (Butler, [1990] 2007:xix), and her book *Gender Trouble* even ends with posing a question. Queer theory is characterised by precisely posing questions rather than answers, and similarly to these milestone texts of queer theory, these movies, in particular *Midnight Cowboy* I would argue, are challenging, demanding and pose questions—to

sexuality and to the film medium. Very much in line with the New Queer Cinema decades later, *Midnight Cowboy* applies a formal self-reflexivity. Also, both *Midnight Cowboy* and *Brokeback Mountain* use narrative strategies that "attempt to preserve a bit of "mystery around the whys" of the characters' motives" (Lang, 2002:144). This is a queer mode of narrative, and indeed poses questions rather than answers.

Though *Brokeback Mountain* is rather conventional and classic in form, like *Midnight Cowboy* it is unconventional in its representations of sexuality and it is experimental in its application of genre elements. Also, it takes use of untraditional techniques in its mediation and characterisation. The way the camera distances itself from Ennis at emotional moments makes it difficult for the viewer to access his emotions. The use of extreme wide shots and very wide shots makes the characters barely visible at times, let alone shows any emotions. This being a story of love and loss, this is an unconventional move. Ennis' lack of visible passion almost makes the film a paradoxical love story. Expressing love and yearning through distance between the lovers, and even a distanced camera, is a strange tactic when a love story tries to establish closeness to and between the subjects. The effect in this case is rather the inclusion of the viewer in their desperate situation. They cannot be together, and the viewer is invited to share this distanced closeness that they experience.

## 4.5 THEY'RE QUEER. SO WHAT? ADVANTAGES OF AN EXTENDED QUEER PERSPECTIVE

Queer theory with its critical attitude towards the normative allows for new ways of thinking, not only about sexuality and gender, but also about film and film making. With a queer perspective on categories within film the film maker is liberated to making untraditional decisions and treading new paths. This allows for creativity and individual expressions. Untraditional and varied cinematic expressions are valuable, because I believe the norm needs challenging. Within movie traditions the Hollywood film has become the norm, and it has received a strong position in regards to film technology, film form and narrative, but also to representations of sexuality and gender. Deviations from the norm, both in film form and sexuality, are immensely valuable, and David Bordwell seems to be of a similar opinion: "Film form can even make us perceive things anew, shaking us out of our accustomed habits and suggesting fresh ways of hearing, seeing, feeling, and thinking" (Bordwell and Thompson, [1979] 1997:68). One reward of such non-normative material is that since we

have to adjust our expectations we need to pay more close attention, be more alert, and the work might involve us more deeply since we must be more active as viewers. Another reward of the non-normative is that it reveals to us our expectations and our taken-for-grantedness. Such works make us reflect on our assumptions (Ibid., 70). When something deviates from the norm we become aware of the norm that otherwise is invisible. These ideas are essential in queer theory. In being somewhat experimental *Midnight Cowboy* yanks the viewer out of the pleasure of just watching without thinking and it offers a queer alternative to the Hollywood norm. Elements like the flashbacks in colour and black and white, the interview sequences in the party, thoughts and dreams mixed with reality, and meta elements commenting on the story action, they all interrupt and continually break the illusion. The viewer is made aware that this is "just a film", and also the viewer is made aware of how seamless films usually are—like *Brokeback Mountain* in comparison.

The commercial success of *Midnight Cowboy* and *Brokeback Mountain* shows that once in a while the public is ready for something new. For generations growing up after these movies the cowboy is no longer only the masculine, heterosexual John Wayne, but he is also queer. While the films might have broken with expectations and were considered controversial at the time of their release, these representations are accommodated into the schema and become part of the definitions and the foundation upon which new expectations are built. In an episode of *The Simpsons* which aired April 27th 2008, a few years after *Brokeback Mountain* was released, Bart Simpson is given a calf to care for. When he realises the calf will be sent to the slaughterhouse he expresses: "Mom, they're gonna kill Lou and make him into food and fringe vests for gay cowboys!" (Kruse, 2008). This is an example of an intertextual reference showing how these movies have shaped the cultural landscape and people's understanding.

## 4.6 QUEERING THE QUEERING: APPLYING GENRE THEORY TO GENDER/SEXUALITY

Through this thesis I have studied the often taken to be natural categories of gender and sexuality, and the obviously man-made, culturally created categories of film, film genres, and stereotypes. By comparing these different kinds of categories I want to underline the artifice of the "naturalised" categories. I have applied queer theory to film, but to show the similarity between the categories of genre/sexuality and of film genres, I will turn this around and apply film theory to gender and sexuality. I will expand the concepts Schatz used to describe the

development of a genre. I return to Henri Focillon's initial use, where he applied the terms to cultural forms in general (Schatz, 1981), and use the terms on the *cultural forms of gender and sexuality*.

I would argue that gender and sexuality have had long periods of experimental stages where they have been taking shape and becoming categories. Then there was the classic stage when the conventions were known and familiar, and "everybody" could interpret them correctly. In the refined stage, in which I would claim that most of Western society is in regard to gender and sexuality at the moment, we see how formal and stylistic details have been introduced and incorporated. The different genders have certain social traits that are expected of them, and similarly the sexualities are viewed as categories with certain conventions and recognisable features. Then, finally, *queer theory* represents the means to reach the baroque, self-reflexive stage. At this level it is possible to see that the conventions, the traits, the "expected" features that we have ascribed to gender and sexuality, they themselves have become the "substance" or the "content". This resembles Judith Butler's queer view on gender, and Robert Lang also points this out, that masculinity itself is indeed a genre formation. He compares gender and genre and states that both are performative. Butler says that "the various acts of gender create the idea of gender" (Butler, [1990] 2007:191), and similarly to film genres the content does not exist in itself but is rendered visible through the repetition of acts (Butler, [1990] 2007:191; Lang, 2002:4). This shows how gender and sexuality also develop, how they change, and how these concepts are also cultural creations, no more "natural" than the category of the western genre or the cinematic stereotype.

# CHAPTER 5
# IN CONCLUSION

In my problem statement I asked how the sexuality of the protagonists is mediated in *Midnight Cowboy* and *Brokeback Mountain*, and how these particular representations of male same-sex sexuality relate to classic cinematic traditions of Hollywood film. I have studied the protagonists by taking aspects of cinematic characterisation into account and by looking at various dimensions of sexuality. Subsequently I have discussed how the portrayals fit with traditions of representing same-sex sexuality, and how they relate to the western genre.

By examining not only the more obvious means of characterisation such as dialogue, performance, and visual appearance of characters, but also other cinematic aspects like mise-en-scene, sound, cinematography, application of mental subjectivity, mirroring, and the use of foils, my study has revealed the importance of such elements in helping the viewer create an understanding of the characters and their inner life and feelings. The analysis has shown how the film medium can express sexuality and gender with other means than just characters, and that for instance genre can contribute in gendering characters.

An example is how the characters' masculinity is enhanced by the application of western genre elements in these movies. Traditionally the western has been perceived as a masculine genre emphasising the American, masculine hero, and often glorifying violence. The films I have studied do not entirely fit into the genre of western, but the use of western iconography and themes make for intertextual references to the genre, and in turn this influences the viewer's understanding and creates certain expectations to the films and to the characters. I suggest that the use of the western elements is meant to make the viewer expect that the protagonists are heterosexual. Of course people shape their own expectations individually and draw on various own experiences, but looking to the traditions of classic Hollywood film and the way that it has developed, I would argue that people watching these movies are expected by the film makers to expect the protagonists to be heterosexual. At the time of the release of *Midnight Cowboy*, Andy Warhol and the underground scene might have coloured people's expectations somewhat in relation to the cinematic image of the cowboy. Additionally this was a time when films broke with the censorship of the past, and Hollywood attempted to go

new and untraditional ways by including "radical" portrayals of sexuality. Still, a viewer encountering these films, relying on her experience with Hollywood films in general, is likely to expect the cowboys to be heterosexual.

*Midnight Cowboy* and *Brokeback Mountain* present their protagonists in "genre drag", one could say, and thereby they offer something new. But I do not forget that they were not the first to depict "gay cowboys". *The Soilers* did this in 1923, giving us a pre-Production Code representation of someone similar to Joe, Ennis and Jack. Then the world was deprived of such representations until after the fall of the Production Code, when *Midnight Cowboy* brought it back. I repeatedly claim the importance of these representations because, "[w]hile films do not have the power to change behavior magically – overnight – images do play an important role in affecting attitudes, which may eventually influence behavior" (Bell-Metereau, 1993:xix). This is why I suggest that Hollywood indeed has a social responsibility in depicting variations and nuances. There are alternatives to Hollywood, for instance the independent scene, but Hollywood's power over people's understanding of the world, of themselves, is not to be taken lightly. We are influenced by the images we see, and if they only show "the norm", then what about us that are somehow different? What about us that Hollywood forgot? But the two movies I have studied *do* show the queer, and break down the conception that "real" masculinity is heterosexual. They even queerly insist on the performative nature of "identity". The protagonists' masculinity, enhanced by the use of western genre elements, is a performed one, a misread one, and ultimately it is actually just played by actors.

Through my study I have also found that these protagonists' sexualities are complex, multi-levelled, and they do not easily fit the categories, however many (re)viewers discuss their sexuality and *attempt* to label them. As such they are queer characters, opposing the normative. Stereotypical representations of same-sex sexuality in Hollywood have changed, but a common trait has been that they have little to do with actual sexuality, but more to do with gender roles, or social gender performance. These protagonists do not fit into the established cinematic sexual stereotypes, they are rather novelistic characters. By depicting the protagonists as non-stereotypical, the movies show the fact that *anyone can be queer*, it is not a manner of clothing or a limp wrist. I will stress my point that the stereotypes that *do* figure in *Midnight Cowboy*, and the "stereotypical action" of killing Jack in *Brokeback*

*Mountain*, is actually not done *in tradition* with Hollywood, but as a *critique* of its traditions. The films criticise homophobia, or *queer*phobia.

I argue that by their explicit gay sex, in particular in *Brokeback Mountain*, the movies utilise an element of surprise. They manage this by virtue of character establishment, but also because Hollywood films (almost as a convention) do not show gay sex. As such these films are milestones in film history, and refreshingly queer behaviour from mainstream films. Or, at least, it is at this very moment. In time these representations will have become part of film history, and they will be accommodated into our schema. After such films as these the cowboy is no longer just John Wayne and homosexuals are not just feminine. These representations are "camping the cowboy", and re-shape the cultural landscape.

Indeed, queer, non-normative, alternative, experimental, unconventional, or avant-garde material—whatever the phrase of choice—is crucial. It allows for new ways of thinking, it makes us aware of the norms that we usually might not even see because they are rendered invisible by repetition, and it reveals to us what we have come to take for granted. This applies to sexuality and gender, as well as to narrative texts, their means of storytelling and their form. Deviations might be difficult to label, and in our need to structure and categorise we might even make a new category, like "gay westerns", because they do not really fit anywhere else. This is what Jon Stewart did as he hosted the Academy Awards. Though it is presented as a joke it is actually a sophisticated play on conventions in the intersection between the expectations to the gender roles of homosexual stereotypes on one hand, and western genre types on the other hand. Whether they are *really* gay or *really* cowboys is unimportant. What *is* important is not to take the categories for granted as natural, but to create awareness to the categories, how they are insufficient, and that they are mere social constructions. Whether we choose to call them "gay cowboys", or even "bisexual shepherds", these are just simplifications, and they are just based on some of their actions. These categories are not *identities*.

In queer tradition, I juxtapose the categories of gender/sexuality and genre/stereotype, and try to show how categories such as gender and sexuality are merely social constructs. They are no more "natural" than cinematic categories. They have become what we have made them through repetition, and now it has become difficult to differentiate between the culturally created conventions and the *concept*, which in itself does not necessarily exist. But we cannot

rid ourselves of the categories. Then we do not have a language and become unable to communicate. Despite them being insufficient or inaccurate, we need to categorise and structure to be able to express ourselves. Film speaks through its own language, and uses for instance genre codes to mediate. People create their sexual identities and mediate this through various codes of sexuality and gender. We need language, and therefore we need categories. Even with an inaccurate language or with an insufficient vocabulary we still manage to express ourselves. Therefore we cannot remove the categories, but we need to be *aware* of them, to adjust them, to replace them, just like we have always done, just like we will always do. But we need to *aware* that we are doing this. And we need to be aware that things could have been different. The categories could have been structured differently. The western might not have been a genre had it not been for the popularity of the frontier stories of the time the film medium was first developed. This just happened, and it has been developed and reproduced ever since. Gender and sexuality could also have been structured differently.

I say that these films aim to surprise, but to a society in a "baroque" stage of perception of sexuality the films would have been unsuccessful in their attempt to surprise. These films would not have had the same impact. *Brokeback Mountain* would not have been as interesting if the viewers did not expect heterosexuality, and in *Midnight Cowboy* the whole concept of Joe's complex sexuality would be easier to grasp and as such the film would lose its edge. But our society is not there yet. These films still face opposition because of their "radical" content. People still argue about which category to place the characters in, even though pioneers like Alfred Kinsey, John Money, Mary McIntosh and Judith Butler have challenged the heteronormative and the hegemonic understandings of gender and sexuality ever since the 1940s. I wish for the day when this thesis is redundant—but it is not …yet.

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